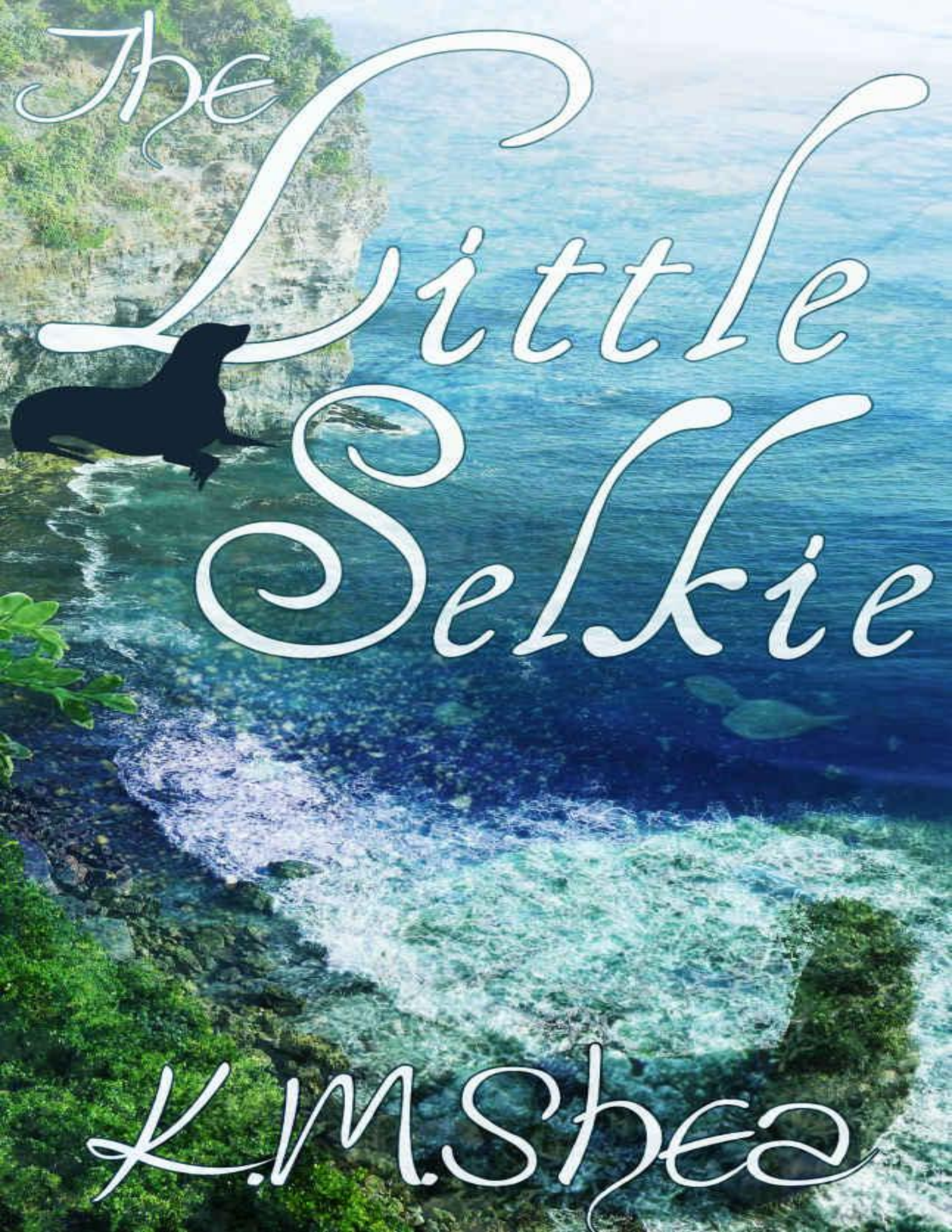
The Little Selkie
K.M. Shea

The Little Selkie
A Timeless Fairy Tale
By: K. M. Shea

a Take Out The Trash! Publication
Copyright © K.M. Shea 2015

THE LITTLE SELKIE
Copyright © 2015 by K. M. Shea

Cover design by Myrrhlynn
Edited by Jeri Larsen
Line Edited by Bethany of A Little Red Ink

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any number whatsoever without written permission of the author, except in the case of quotations embodied in articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

www.kmshea.com

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: A Rescue
Chapter 2: The Capture
Chapter 3: Voiceless
Chapter 4: Festivals and Food
Chapter 5: Breakfast with Royals
Chapter 6: The Wild Flower and the White Rose
Chapter 7: Parties and Portraits
Chapter 8: Eating in Easky
Chapter 9: Breaking and Entering
Chapter 10: Regarding Borders
Chapter 11: Bandits
Chapter 12: The Summer Ball
Chapter 13: Evidence
Chapter 14: Stopping Storms
Epilogue
About

Chapter 1
A Rescue

If Dylan knew how much trouble it would be to save one bothersome human, she might have thought twice before performing her good deed.

She was minding her own business, investigating the violent storm that had recently popped up near the coast. Although the rain was torrential and the waves turbulent, Dylan was safe, floating deep below the surface in her sea lion body. She dodged a broken board and avoided a tattered sail.

Had those greedy humans tried to sail in this *weather?* she wondered, twitching her sea lion whiskers forward. She gave the sail a second glance before spiraling upwards, flicking her hind-flippers in irritation when the waves tossed her under the surface. Several humpback whale-lengths away, Dylan saw an orange glow above the water.

She popped above the surface, and a cresting wave almost dunked her back underwater. Still, she could see the burning ship, which was half sunk already. *Yep. They tried to sail in it. Crazy landers*, she scoffed.

She, begrudgingly, swam a little closer to look for survivors. She couldn't see or hear any sailors on deck—which should have been easy. In Dylan's experience, sailors on sinking ships either cursed or prayed louder than usual.

All the lifeboats were missing. The humans must have abandoned their vessel when it became obvious she wasn't going to float.

Good. Dylan dove back underwater and narrowly avoided smacking into a splintered board. Thinking herself free of duty, she went about exploring the wreckage and the storm—being careful to stay a safe distance away from the sinking ship. The stately prow was the only piece of the craft jutting out of the water.

This storm…It came on too sudden and strong to be of the ocean, she thought, swimming backwards as she looked up at the wreckage strewn in the water, being tossed about by the wild waves.

Perhaps I should go get Muriel. She's more knowledgeable about those human weather mages. Although why humans should wish to sink each other is beyond anyone's reasoning, Dylan decided, bending her body so

sharply to change directions that she almost touched her hind-flippers with her nose. *This doesn't feel like weather magic, though. Weather magic always feels like sandpaper. This—*

Lightning lit up the water above her head. For an instant, she saw a human silhouette floating in the water above her. Then the flashing light died.

I'll pretend I didn't see that. She started swimming south. She made it about one seal length before smoothly turning around and swimming back towards the human shape. *Silly selkie duties. Guardians of the sea, my hind-flippers*!

As a selkie—a people of the sea who had the abilities to wear pelts and become seals—Dylan and her kind avoided contact with landers. There were a few exceptions, and one of them was to save a drowning human. Her parents had banged it into her skull at a young age that, as guardians of the ocean, selkies were duty-bound to save anyone in distress in their waters—humans included.

Resentfully, Dylan swam up to the human. It was an unconscious male, dressed in a baggy white shirt that—as it was wet—was going to make him weigh a stone more, not to mention the weight of his sodden boots and cotton trousers. *It* would *be a male*, she barked before she began the arduous process of nudging him to the surface.

Dylan got him to the surface twice before she realized she would need to throw him on something floating, or he would just keep sinking.

Luck would have it that, nearby, a board from the ruined ship floated on the unstable seas. As she lacked hands in her sea lion form, it took her a lot of heaving and prodding to get the human resting on the board.

You better not be dead already. *You're ruining my investigation. Now Da and Ma will wonder where I've been, and I'll have to tell them,* Dylan groused as she used her head to push his arm onto the wooden plank. She floated backwards and inspected her work.

From the chest up, the human rested on the plank. The sea began to calm as the storm moved further north. Her work here was done. *Good riddance. Don't try to sail in any more storms, lug-bug.* Dylan dove back beneath the water. She took a moment to get her bearings, and in that short time, a violent ocean wave tossed the wood, sending the man plunging back into the water.

By King Murron's crest! The ocean must be testing me. She swam back to the human and dove beneath him so she could push him out of the water. Again. It was unlikely she could toss the human onto anything stable enough to let him ride out the rest of the weather.

It would be faster if I turned human, but, nah! Dylan turned her nose towards land. The few times she had changed from a sea lion into her human body in the middle of the ocean, she'd half-drowned herself while sliding out of her pelt. Changing *and* trying to keep the Sinker from sinking would be nearly impossible. Plus, she mostly just didn't want to. Being a sea lion was *fun.* Human? Ehhh.

Still, even in her "fun" body, it took ages to get the man close to shore. Lacking arms and hands in her sea lion body, she was stuck nosing and pushing the human along while she tried to keep his head above water.

When they reached shore, she realized it was rocky, without a patch of sand in sight. *I'm not saving you from drowning just so you can have your silly head smashed on rocks.* She nudged the human farther south. When she found a small, sandy bay—empty of rocks of any kind—Dylan pushed and dragged the human so his body rested on the shore.

There. You're welcome, she said, turning her hind flippers forward so she could shuffle back into the ocean. She twisted to give the human one last look and watched an incoming wave crest over him, flipping him so he was face down in the sand.

Dylan narrowed her sea lion eyes at the man. *I'm starting to think he's doing this on purpose*. *I give up. I'll switch and drag his carcass onto shore*, she decided. She planted her flippers in the sand before initiating the switch. Magic foamed and fizzled inside her sea lion body, and Dylan felt her pelt part. She stood up, stepping out of her pelt in the body of a human girl—her other form. She wrapped the pelt around herself in a makeshift dress, tucking the edges together to hold it, then flipped the human on his back. She grabbed his arms, yanked them over his head, and dragged him up to the dry sand dunes.

"Do you live?" she asked, slapping one of the human's cheeks. He didn't respond. She set her ear by his mouth and heard his raspy breath. "You've got too much water in you." She smashed her hands onto his chest. It took a few thumps, but eventually she got it right, and the human folded in half, coughing up the sea water in his lungs. "Are you awake now?" Dylan asked when his coughing subsided.

There was no response, although his breathing sounded better.

Frowning, she tucked a wad of seaweed under his head to lift him above the dry sand. “If I leave you here, I would not be surprised if some land creature lumbered by and ate you. You have terrible luck.” She pushed his wet, sand-colored hair aside. “Are you listening?” she asked, inspecting his face.

Dylan wasn’t a good judge of human beauty—she was far more enamored with the ocean—but it seemed to her that the man looked well enough, if not half-drowned and a little ashen.

She sighed and plopped down in the sand next to the human. “I will wait with you until you wake up, or until someone finds you. They cannot have missed the storm, and although you landers are stupid enough to be out on the ocean when you shouldn’t, you are meticulous enough to remember a ship was out. Soon, people will start searching the coast. They always do when they lose a boat.”

The storm was blocking out what little bit of the sun was left. Tiny patches of visible sky began turning satin purple, accented with glittering stars.

The sand was still warm—the sun had been strong earlier in the day, and the storm had come on so suddenly. Dylan buried her toes and fingers in the warm beach after checking the human again.

Even from the shore, she could see the dark spot on the ocean where the ship had gone down, another victim to an angry ocean.

“The ocean is a hard mistress,” Dylan said pushing her wild hair out of her face. Although her words were hard, her throat and heart ached. She hated it whenever a human drowned. It seemed like a senseless loss. If they stayed on the land where they belonged, their lives would be much safer.

She inhaled before the selkie song of passing spilled from her lips. Selkies sang in a magic language, unknown and foreign-sounding to anyone not their own, but Dylan thought the ocean and those who had died in its embrace might understand. So she sang, her voice weaving up and down, weighted with sorrow and regret but buoyed by the promise of hope. Her song rang out above the crashing waves, and the magic in her voice called out to the ocean. Two giant sea serpents of water formed in response. They eased across the beach, catching bits of sand that spiraled

through their serpent bodies in the currents that held the magic-formed creatures together.

Dylan sang and held her hands out to the creatures. They lowered their snake-like snouts until they touched her hands. They would remain as long as she sang and do only what she bid in her selkie song. For the song of passing, they would stand with her and observe her sorrow.

Dylan continued to sing and check on the human. During the following hour, she sang a song of peace and a song of stillness. Twice her saved human opened his eyes, but never for more than a few seconds.

Dylan was standing, singing a song of her own making with her great serpents curling around her, when she noticed a glow in the forest. She cut herself off and leaned against the coiled body of one of her water serpents —magic gave the water resistance and a surface.

She squinted in the twilight, straining her ears to hear above the crash of ocean waves on the shore. “They’ve come. Off you two go,” she said. The creatures dissolved. The magic that held them together dissipated, and the water that formed them fell on the shore like a torrential rain.

The Sinker groaned. “Don’t worry,” Dylan said, patting his cheek. “Someone’s coming. You’ll be fine. Don’t sail in another storm, though,” she warned, retreating to the ocean. When she was shoulder-deep, she untucked her pelt and slid into it. She felt the magic binding catch, sealing her inside her sea lion body. She happily splashed in the water for a moment, before she remembered her responsibility and settled in to watch the Sinker.

A search party, armed with torches, rope, and lots of bulky, impractical clothes moved toward the bay. When the light of their torches fell on Dylan’s human, a young woman wearing a puffy dress shouted and hurried across the sand, throwing herself at the half-drowned male’s side.

Finally—he’s safe. My duty has been fulfilled. She relished the thought and dove underwater, giving her human no further thought. Instead, she considered how she might explain to her father—king of the selkies—that she, his youngest daughter, had ignored all his orders and swum into the center of a storm. And she had a dreadful feeling the typhoon wasn’t a natural occurrence.

Chapter 2
The Capture

The sea witch fled north. Dylan could feel her traveling in their direction—whatever bit of ocean the foul creature touched seemed to grow tainted, a feeling that spread quite a distance from the sea witch's presence.

Finally. The witch would pay!

Dylan. Dylan!

Dylan would have ignored her oldest sister Maureen's distinctive call if she could have, but Maureen's seal body crashed into her. While Dylan's sea lion body was the same length as Maureen's *seal* body, Maureen's form was much thicker and had a lot more heft to it, so she bounced Dylan off her body like a minnow.

What? Dylan barked, anxious to chase after their target.

Maureen floated in front of her, tilting her seal head as she listened to other seal voices.

Dylan settled in with ill-disguised impatience as she felt the sea witch draw closer. Most days, Dylan was perfectly happy with her sea lion form, even if it was a bit of a disgrace. (Bad selkie blood in her mother's side.) Even if she was the only one of her kind in her father's kingdom, she could swim twice as fast as anyone else, was far more flexible, and could shuffle-walk on shore in her sea lion body instead of inching along like the rest of the selkies.

The inability to stay underwater as long as her kinsmen was a definite downside. Dylan's record was nine minutes, but most selkies could stay underwater up to forty minutes. Most irritatingly, though, all other selkies could go twice as deep as she.

It was also a little harder to understand her clan when in seal form. As a sea lion, Dylan communicated with barks and chirps. Her kinsmen, however, communicated with croons and clicks. Some vocal noises were distinctive—she had been yelled at by enough selkies in their seal bodies to recognize when they said her name—but complex ideas were difficult to interpret.

Her father's long-winded speech was a perfect example. While Maureen listened to the seal croons, Dylan was stuck ignorant and waiting. She fidgeted—twisting and twirling in the water under Maureen's baleful eye.

Dylan *thought* the croon meant Dylan was supposed to hang back with her sisters, Muriel and Maureen. She had long ago lost interest in learning what her father had to say as a seal, because it was typically an idea or order she didn't care for.

Whenever possible, Dylan confessed her worst sins to her father, King Murron, when he was in his seal body. That way, she could skip off, claiming she didn't understand him. That was how she'd gotten around a severe punishment for swimming in a storm near a shipwreck two years prior.

Dylan started swimming again before her father finished crooning, twisting around her sister and leaving her in her wake—her streamlined body pulling ahead of the other seal selkies in their company.

Dylan! Maureen clicked. Maureen was not above half-drowning Dylan to keep her in check.

Dylan ignored the call and dove behind a line of her father's best fighters, waiting for them to move forward and capture the sea witch in their trap. *Come out, come out witch-y. It's time you pay the price of your deeds.*

For approximately two years, the witch had wandered and troubled the ocean surrounding Ringsted. It started with unnatural storms up and down the coast. That hadn't bothered the selkies too much—although all the ship wreckage wasn't good—until they realized the sea witch was supplementing her magic with the blood of ocean creatures: sharks, sea lions, whales, anything she could get her hands on. Dylan winced, remembering the last creature she had found drained of blood—a small, lifeless dolphin.

As guardians of the sea, the act enraged the selkies. *All* selkies.

You're going to regret every drop of blood you spilled, Dylan thought as she peered between the hefty selkie warriors in their seal bodies.

Maureen and Muriel caught up to Dylan. Maureen bumped her with more force than necessary, but Muriel fretfully nosed her cheek.

Wait, Muriel clicked as she moved in front of her.

Dylan twitched her whiskers at her sister and swam for the surface to get a breath of air.

Her sisters weren't merely trying to coddle her. This time, it was crucial that she follow orders. If the sea witch dodged the trap, Dylan would have to take the risk of changing forms in the ocean to sing as a human. Her voice was the key to their plan.

It was almost as if the ocean felt sorry for giving her the near disgrace of a sea lion body by gifting her with the strongest, best voice of all the selkies in her father's clan. It wasn't just an honor; it was a weapon. As the best singer, Dylan was also the most infused with water-wielding magic.

When Dylan returned to her sisters, the pair squeezed her between them, as if they could shelter her.

Danger! Murphy, another one of Dylan's sisters, crooned as she swam towards them. She just made it behind the line of fighter selkies when the sea witch appeared.

The sea witch was human, of course, though her stark white skin made her look fearsome in the water. Her tattered, black dress spread around her, moving like octopus tentacles in the underwater currents. A steel bar was tied to her back, and her eyes glazed hot with anger when she saw the selkies waiting for her.

She tried to hurl a wave of water magic at Dylan, her sisters, and the fighters, but the water passed them without disturbing so much as a whisker.

The selkies chose to sacrifice the use of their own water magic to capture the witch in their seal form because of its one great advantage: they were immune to all kinds of water magic.

The witch swam for the ocean surface—moving as if riding a rolling wave—and turned her body towards land.

Dylan swam after her, and her sisters hurried to keep up.

The line of selkies waiting near the shore advanced, cutting off her escape route. Snarling, the sea witch dove back under water and slid the metal bar off her shoulder; she shook it, and Dylan could see the edge gleam. It was an edged weapon of some sort—some kind of hiltless sword.

No! Dylan barked, bursting forward.

Powerless under the threat of a steel blade, the selkies dodged the weapon, leaving a gaping hole through which the sea witch could escape.

The witch dove through it and swam for shore, the selkies on her heels.

Dylan burst forward with the speed of the sea lion, passing the pursuing selkies. The witch still beat her and clambered onto dry land, swiping her sword behind her to dissuade any followers.

You want to play rough? Fine! Dylan thought, as magic fizzed and flowed in her veins.

Dylan! One of her sisters clicked.

Dylan burst from her sea lion body and expertly wrapped her pelt around her. She took in a great gasp of air before singing—her voice heavy with rage.

Dylan's two water serpents surged from the ocean, screaming with rage as the water of their bodies cast dazzling patterns on the sand. They glided towards the sea witch, who was clawing her way up past the sandy dunes and toward the forest.

Dylan and her serpents chased after her, ignoring the distressed calls from her kinsmen as she slipped into the trees. She sang occasional notes to keep her water creations moving but spent most of her air running, closing in on the pale sea witch.

The sea witch shouted and cursed when one of Dylan's serpents almost caught her, teasing a dark grin from Dylan.

"I've got you," Dylan said. She jumped a fallen log and slithered into a meadow, inhaling to start a new song as the witch turned to face her.

The sea witch's face tightened with terror.

Dylan extended a finger at the witch, her voice piercing the sky as she sang. Her water serpents rose higher and higher until they towered above the trees and stared down at the sea witch, mouths open and posed to strike.

"Don't just stand there—knock her out! She'll kill us all, you idiots!" the sea witch shouted.

Dylan noticed something out of the corner of her eye and turned to look. Something hit the back of her head, and she fell face first to the forest floor.

"No," Dylan groaned. Darkness rushed her vision and stole her consciousness, cradling her in blackness.

When Dylan woke up, the first thing she realized was that she was missing her pelt. The fabric wrapped around her was not her soft, salt-crusted pelt. Instead, she wore a long, knee-length cotton shirt tucked into a belt. Dylan rocketed upright, her head screaming in pain. Her breath came in panicked gasps, and her heart pounded. She didn't see her pelt anywhere.

There were human men aplenty. They were gathered around a campfire and walking in and out of tents. They were a greasy bunch, armed to the teeth and smelling of sweat and blood.

But Dylan didn't care who the men were; she *needed* her pelt. She threw herself to her feet and was almost yanked back to the ground by a rope attached to one of her wrists.

"Oi, she's 'wake," one of the greasy men shouted. He spat and folded his arms across his bare, tanned chest. "Aren't you a strange thing," he said, approaching Dylan with glittering eyes as some of his companions joined him.

"Where is my pelt?" Dylan demanded, her heart squeezing in her chest.

"Pretty, if you go for them kind of looks. Whaddya say, want to play?" the man asked, offering Dylan a smile peppered with missing teeth.

"Where is my pelt?" Dylan said, her voice growing tighter.

"Jus' take it easy. We ain't gonna hurt you none," another man said, reaching for her.

"Where's my *pelt*!" Dylan screamed. Instead of cutting the note off she carried it—like a shrieking sea hawk. The noise sent some men to their knees, but it also brought every bit of water in the camp ricocheting into the air.

Water exploded out of canteens, and a pot set to boil over a fire shot vapor into the air as its water fled to hang over the camp. Water for horses, any filled buckets, and every drop of water swirled at the sound of Dylan's voice.

"Where *is* it," she demanded as men cowered.

No one responded. They were all stunned, staring at the water hanging above their heads.

Her breath came faster. Even though air was entering her lungs, she felt like she couldn't breathe. Her head rang and her world spun. Worry and fear nauseated her.

“Where!” Dylan shouted. She sang a disconcerting note that made the water form into a sphere and hit the ground so hard it sent dirt spraying everywhere.

“We don’t know!” one man shouted, diving behind a tent.

“*Yes, you do*!” Dylan directed her ball of water to blast the tent, destroying it like a tidal wave.

“The lord has it!” another man shouted. “ ’e took it with ’im when he went off with the mage!”

The blood in Dylan’s body turned into ice, and her heart faltered. “W-what?”

“She said ’e needed to keep it close and destroy it if you acted out.”

Dylan yanked on the rope—which had been attached to the demolished tent—and pulled herself free. She dropped her hold on the water, making it collapse in the middle of the camp, and ran into the forest.

Tree branches grabbed at her. Thorny bushes snagged the tender skin of her legs and cut her. Twice, she fell, terror making her clumsy.

A human had her pelt. *A human had her pelt*! What should she do? What *could* she do? She had chased after the sea witch and gotten herself caught! Worse, if the man who had her pelt wasn’t twenty different kinds of idiotic, he would know that without her pelt, she couldn’t change back into a sea lion. If he poked even the smallest hole in it, she wouldn’t be able to reclaim her secondary form every again. She would be at his mercy. She! Her clan’s best singer! All because she was too brash and—

“They said he was with the mage—the sea witch,” Dylan said aloud, the men’s terrified shouts coming back to her. The sea witch *knew*. She knew all about them—she knew about their magic! Shock and horror froze her in place, like a glacier. “And I am my clan’s best singer,” Dylan whispered, her eyes tearing up.

The sea witch and her human henchman would force Dylan to use her powers for them. She would be their *tool*.

“What do I do?” Dylan whispered, her lips numb. They had all the power, and she had none. *I am like a sea lion caught by a shark. If I fight back or run, they’ll ruin my pelt, and I will never be a sea lion again. If I do what they order, I will aid the sea witch’s pursuit of death and destruction!*

Dylan fell to her knees, hope and despair hitting her body like a typhoon. “I am ruined,” she whispered.

A strange light passed in front of her face, and a musical voice said, “Strange, I didn’t think I would find someone who looks even worse for the wear than I do. What is wrong, selkie lass? Why are you out of the sea and away from your colony?”

The feminine voice sounded like hope and magic, so Dylan rallied the strength to lift her gaze. In front of her was a large…animal. She supposed it resembled something equine, but its mane and tail were made of black and blue flames, and its body was black like night and spotted with starlight. Perched on its back was a woman she thought beautiful and exquisite. She looked just a few years older than Dylan’s almost eighteen years, but every inch of her was gorgeous enough to banish the darkness laying claim to Dylan’s soul.

The beautiful woman wore a dress, ocean blue and glittering in the dim light of the forest. As Dylan watched, it changed into a blue-green color.

“You’re a magic user,” Dylan whispered. Relief crashed over her like a tidal wave. Good magic users—from mages-in-training to fairy godmothers—could be trusted, and consulted for advice. Even Dylan, a selkie, knew this.

The woman smiled as she dismounted. “I am an enchantress-in-training. My name is Angelique. Can I help you?”

Tears welled up in Dylan’s eyes, and she told her story and explained her identity. She told the Lady Enchantress about the sea witch, how she had long evaded the selkies’ traps through sheer conniving or dumb luck as humans had ruined their ranks and traps on several different occasions. And she told her about nearly catching her…and being caught in return.

“I am ruined, Lady Enchantress,” Dylan said, squatting in front of a tree, wishing it were a rock that overlooked the ocean.

“Couldn’t you return to your people and tell them what happened? Surely they would storm the camp,” Angelique said.

“Yes, and my pelt would be destroyed in retribution. Although perhaps I have earned it for my careless actions,” Dylan said, her voice dry and scratchy. “It seems it is the only course available to me, for I cannot remain near my pelt. They’ll use my voice. Unless…” Dylan said, leaning forward, her eyes regaining some of their brightness.

“Yes?” Angelique prodded, patting the neck of her impatient steed before sitting on a log across from Dylan.

“Could you…*take* my voice?”

Angelique blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Could you separate my voice from my body and take it?”

“No, definitely not. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Oh,” Dylan dropped.

“But…” Angelique sighed, “…I could seal your voice.”

“Seal it?”

“Lock it up, essentially. Make it so you are unable to utter a noise.”

“Yes! Oh, please,” Dylan said, sliding forward on her knees. “I’ll pay any price, just please, silence me!”

“Are you sure it is the wisest course of action?” Angelique said. “Shouldn’t you tell your kinsmen first?”

“This is my mistake and I know I can make it right—as long as I am swift. If my voice is gone, I will be as useful as a rock to the sea witch and can wait for her and her minions to lower their guard. When they do, I will take back what is mine,” Dylan promised. “And *then* I will tell my clan. And tell them that the sea witch has human allies,” she frowned.

Angelique pressed her perfect lips together. “I don’t think it is wise to do this alone.”

“I don’t need help. Besides you locking up my voice, I mean.”

“Sealing it.”

“Yes, that.”

“Are you certain? Making a decision that will have an immense consequence on all of your kinsmen without their knowledge seems unfair,” Angelique said.

For a moment uncertainty clawed at Dylan. *She’s right. Selkies will be put in danger if I fail, but this is* my *mistake! But perhaps…no. I can’t afford the time.*

“This is the only way,” Dylan said with a false bravado.

Angelique sighed. “As you wish—although I will not pretend to agree with your methods. I would like to help you more, but I am needed in Sole. I can seal your voice, but I haven’t much time to do anything beyond that. I’m sorry.”

Dylan shook her head. “If you seal my voice, you will have done more than I could ever repay you for, Lady Enchantress. I am strong. I can handle this alone.”

Angelique gave Dylan a look she didn’t understand. “It has been my experience that when we believe we are capable of handling it ourselves, it

becomes a situation that is so very much bigger than we are. I will seal your voice, though I hope you won't regret it."

"I would much rather be able to swim as a sea lion in the ocean than sing," Dylan assured her.

"Oh, I won't seal your voice forever."

"What?"

"I can work a counter spell into it, so your voice will return to you when you fulfill the requirements," Angelique said.

"Oh. What will the requirements be?" Dylan asked.

"True love's first kiss."

Dylan blinked. "*What*?"

Angelique smiled at Dylan, although it seemed a little brittle. "I apologize, but it is the most powerful counter spell I know. In something as powerful as this, love is the only key I can use."

Dylan shrugged. "As you say."

"You agree so swiftly?"

"It is my mess. Getting my voice back is more than I deserve," Dylan shrugged. "Someday I'll find someone to break the curse. The bigger threat is that sea witch."

Angelique stared at Dylan for a moment. "You are…unusual."

"My father says that all the time. I think it is merely that most folk don't know how to take responsibility for themselves," Dylan scoffed.

Angelique smiled weakly. "There's a difference between being responsible and being brash."

"So I have heard. Is there anything I must do for you to seal my voice? Do you need ingredients?" Dylan asked.

"No," Angelique said. "It's an easy enough spell. It is the results that are potent and dangerous. Are you certain you do not wish to tell your family?"

"Yes. Please, seal my voice, Lady Enchantress."

The Lady Enchantress stood and cleared her throat. When she looked at Dylan, Dylan was pushed back on her heels by the heavy magic in the enchantress's gaze.

"Dylan, daughter of King Murron and Queen Gwenllian, guardians of the seas, I bind your voice and seal it from now until the day that a kiss of true love touches your lips. You shall not speak; you shall not sing. You will be *silent*." As Angelique spoke, light laced with ribbons of pale blue

and green streaked around Dylan like falling stars. The light closed in on her neck, encircling it like a necklace. There was no pain, but Dylan felt pressure in her throat. The magic warmed her neck as it soaked into her skin, making her glow for a few moments. There was the sound of a great door closing, and the magic was gone.

"I will carry your message of the sea witch to other mages and magic users," Angelique said, gathering up her mount's reins, as if she hadn't just done something extraordinary.

Was that all it took? My voice can't be gone with that little magic, Dylan thought.

"And if I hear no news from Ringsted by next spring, I will return and see if I cannot help you. Don't worry; if you reclaim your pelt but not your voice, I have associates who can break off my magic," Angelique said, giving Dylan a reassuring smile. It dimmed as she seemed to think of something else, but the beautiful enchantress brushed it off and remounted her steed. "You are certain you will be alright?" she asked.

Dylan opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She brightened, offering the Lady Enchantress a big smile. Then she remembered Muriel's lessons in manners and bent over in a deep bow.

"Take care, Dylan of the selkies," Angelique said, turning her horse and kneeing it forward. The enchantress and her mount were off—riding through the forest faster than should be possible. Light trailed after them like the tail of a comet.

Dylan watched until the light faded before she turned around and headed in the direction of the camp of men. In the end, she had to follow her nose back, using the scent of the campfire.

She approached the camp, moving around the edges. Men sifted through the wreckage caused by Dylan's panic. They had already repaired one of the tents and refilled their buckets and containers of water.

She started to step into the camp but a man caught sight of her. " 'ere she is! Get 'er!"

The camp exploded into chaos. Some slammed boards over water barrels and sat on them, hoping to keep the water trapped if she sang again. Some men fled rather than face her, and others grabbed weapons.

Two men lunged for her. Dylan crouched, hoping to dodge, but something hit her from behind and sent her pitching face forward into the ground.

I need to remember to look behind me, she thought with great irritation as darkness welled up around her, reclaiming her for the second time that day.

Chapter 3
Voiceless

Dylan tried to groan when she started to regain consciousness, but no noise could be uttered. As pain throbbed in her skull, she remembered the day's events and unsuccessfully tried to groan again.

"You swear the threat of the pelt will hold her in line?" a male voice asked.

Did they hit me with a walrus tusk? Crusty barnacles, ow. She scrunched her eyes shut even tighter in an expression of pain.

When she heard a watery voice speak, her heart stopped.

"The selkies treasure their seal forms as they treasure their own lives. The girl will mind you—her return promises as much," the female voice said. It was a voice that sounded like water—but not like the roaring ocean bass of Dylan's father or the soothing brook soprano that belonged to her mother. This woman's voice sounded flat and stale, like marsh water that hadn't drained in a century.

"You'll use her?"

"Of course. She'll never turn against her people, but there are other possibilities," the watery voice said. "The humans, of course. And she will make it easier to capture sea life for my sacrifices."

"How?"

"Marine creatures will flock to her. The shed blood will bring immense power," the woman said, the marsh quality of her voice suffocating Dylan as if she had fallen in a bog.

Dylan opened her eyes and was pleased to learn the woman—the sea witch—was within eyesight.

Dylan was splayed out on the ground, a pile of rope mounded next to her. They probably meant to tie her up before she awoke and miscalculated her return to consciousness. Dylan wanted to smile, but instead she forced herself to remain still and watched.

"You ought to be more careful about where you butcher things," the sea witch's companion said. "Someone found the last killer whale you drained and reported it to the king and queen."

“I do not fear your *royalty*,” the sea witch said, her voice scornful as she walked across the camp.

“Maybe you don’t, but they can make my life deuced difficult,” the man said.

Now that she was closer, Dylan could see the sea witch’s hair was dark, and one side of her head was shaved. Snail shells and tiny fish skeletons woven into her hair clicked when she moved her head. Her skin was still pale white, but it was dappled—as though she were washed with sea salt after the ocean water had evaporated. Her hair and her clothes were damp, and wet tendrils of fish netting hung from her like fingers.

Her companion was a short and stocky man with ash-brown hair and a ruddy complexion. He was young, perhaps in his mid- or late twenties. Dylan supposed some might think him good looking, if they could look past his weak chin and pinched eyes. But his scent was…odd. He smelled strongly of soot and smoke—unusual for a man so finely dressed.

Dylan lay quiet as she listened to their conversation with boiling anger. How she *longed* to throttle the sea witch for her mindless slaughter!

“And what do we do if this girl refuses to sing for you?”

“You rip her pelt to shreds,” the sea witch said. “And we use her as bait.”

“For what? Sharks?” the man snorted, amused by his own joke.

“No. For her family.”

It took every drop of Dylan’s feeble self-control to keep from leaping to her feet. *Never! You will never touch my family as long as I have breath in my body, you festering, shark-mouthed, hag!*

“What good is one family of selkies?”

“Imbecile. This girl is the youngest daughter of Murron, King of the Ringsted selkies,” the sea witch snapped.

Dylan’s fury fell and her heart pounded in her chest. *How did she know?*

The man asked, “How do you know? Don’t all them selkies look alike?”

“Perhaps, but there is only one selkie in the seas surrounding Ringsted who has the body—the pelt—of a sea lion, and that is the youngest princess of the clan.”

“I didn’t even know selkies could be sea lions. Shady business,” the man grunted.

“It matters not. Her capture will provide an edge for us—it will either lead to the slaughter and sacrifice of sea creatures or to the capture of her family.”

Dylan didn’t take the chance to think. Before she finished processing the sea witch’s bleak statement, she scrambled to her feet and threw herself at the sea witch, tackling her to the ground.

Dylan got her dearest wish and managed to fit her hands around the sea witch’s neck, but before she could squeeze, the man grabbed the back of her shirt-dress and hauled her away.

“Wildcat, isn’t she?” the man asked as Dylan lunged forward, almost escaping his grasp.

The sea witch glared as she picked herself off the ground. “Sea serpent,” she hissed. She tried to backhand Dylan, but she ducked and kicked out at the witch.

“From the way my men feared her, I thought she would be a hellion when she woke,” the man grunted. He cursed when Dylan kicked backwards, hitting his kneecap. “Someone hold her!”

The sea witch grabbed her by her hair, so Dylan flung herself at the twisted woman and managed to clock her in the nose before two men—one huge and the other short—grabbed her and held her between the two of them with iron grips as she thrashed and twisted.

“Something is odd,” the sea witch said, wiping sweat from her damp skin and blood from her nose. “She should have started singing by now.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” The man turned to inspect her. “She is exotic. Do all selkies look like this?”

The sea witch ignored his question and narrowed her eyes as she approached.

Dylan tried to kick the witch and missed.

“Speak, selkie,” the sea witch ordered.

Dylan tried spitting at the sea witch and again, sadly, missed.

“You think you can be silent? I will make you *howl* and *beg*.” The sea witch struck like an eel. She clamped a hand on Dylan’s left shoulder and thrust her talon-like nails into her skin.

That pain alone wasn’t so bad, but after the woman emptied a vial of sea water over her hand, she used some kind of magic that ran through Dylan’s body like an ocean current and did nothing but cause waves of pain. She opened her mouth to scream soundlessly, her back arched with

pain as tears leaked out of her eyes. Her legs gave out, and it felt like the pain was tearing her from limb to limb as the sea witch shoved her nails deeper.

"Careful you don't kill her," the sea witch's companion said. The camp was silent in the vacuum of Dylan's inaudible screams.

When the pain made Dylan's vision grow hazy and she sagged in her captor's grasp like a ragdoll, the sea witch let her go.

"Black blood, she's been sealed." The sea witch spat, wiping her nails off on her dress.

"She what?"

"Someone with powerful magic has gotten to her already, and they sealed off her voice. An enchantress or a high-ranking fairy godmother—I would recognize the sickening smell of such *well-wished* magic anywhere," the sea witch gurgled.

"What now? Doesn't that ruin all of your plans?" the man asked as his minions lowered Dylan—still dazed with pain—to the ground.

"No, but it changes them. You will hold onto the girl. She'll be nothing but a menace to me, and she's useless without her voice, for that is how the seal people work their charms on the ocean."

"What am I supposed to do with her?"

"Lock her up; throw her in a dungeon; I don't care. Hold her captive for now. We'll hold her until her people have given up all hope of recovering her and stop guarding the seas. Then we will bribe them with her life and catch them off guard. We must end it this summer," the sea witch said. Although she didn't move, her voice sounded farther and farther away to Dylan's pained ears.

"Agreed. Although it has been quite profitable, I'm anxious to finish all this as well," the man said as Dylan closed her eyes. She rested her head on the ground, every muscle in her body aching and twitching.

"Do not take any chances with her, Jarlath."

"I won't, I won't."

"I *mean* it," the sea witch hissed, and Jarlath yelped.

"I won't! By the king's beard, woman, watch those claws!" Jarlath said.

The sea witch replied, but Dylan didn't hear it as she eased off into the safety of sleep, away from her aching body.

Dylan woke to the steady drip of water on stone. She opened her eyes and had to rub them twice before they grew used to the sputtering torches mounted on the walls.

There were no windows in the damp, stone structure, and the air was cool—like a cellar dug beneath a selkie home.

Metal rods that ran from the low ceiling to the floor divided Dylan from the rest of the room. The room stored gold and jewels and what looked like a few magical lamps. She'd seen those in her bookworm-second-oldest sister Mairead's illustrated books. There were also sparkling crowns, a stack of swords that gleamed with magic, a few shields, and other assorted, magical junk.

Dylan looked out at the items without much care until she noticed, on the opposite side of the room next to a skeleton of a man-eating unicorn, a water horse—a kelpie. A live one.

Watchful, she pushed herself to the back of her portion of the stone room. She stared at the creature.

A kelpie resembled a horse about as much as Lady Enchantress Angelique's mount did. Equine in form with four legs, a mane, tail, and similar body structure, this beast was a horse the same way a hellhound was a dog. It was black—not the shiny black of a normal horse, but the dull, tattered black of cloth that has spent an eternity submerged underwater—with a few gray dapples on its hindquarters. Its mane and tail were long and scraggly—like it had just climbed out of a lake—and storm gray in color. Algae coated its flanks and chest, and hair covered its hooves, too. Its knees, barrel, and face were all sunken in, and its eyes were the glazed white of death—neither pure nor bright.

It wheezed as it breathed, its sides heaving. It didn't even turn to look at Dylan as she armed herself with an empty bucket and crouched behind her cot.

After watching it for several minutes, Dylan realized the animal was chained in a box, and wouldn't be going anywhere. It didn't even have a bucket of water—and as a creature of the ocean, the kelpie was in the lowest points of torture and misery without it.

What sort of idiot keeps a kelpie? Dylan thought.

Kelpies were the worst predators of the sea—worse than flesh-eating whales, worse than sharks.

They lived alone and craved the flesh of all creatures—selkie and humans alike. They hunted on shores and in the dark parts of the oceans. They would drag unwitting humans into the water and drown them, and they would attack sea creatures and slay them. Kelpies used an oily kind of magic to kill, and several selkie had been slain by the creatures even though they were in their seal bodies and immune to water magic.

On the whole, not much was known about kelpies. Mairead, the most widely read of Dylan's sisters, and Muriel, who knew the most about magic, said they suspected water horses must have two strains of magic. First, water magic—because they could charge through water faster than seals, and their far-from streamlined bodies would normally have huge amounts of drag. Second, whatever magic they used to hunt.

Dylan shook her head. *The stupidity of landers knows no bounds.* She poked around her jail, testing the metal bars and jostling the door, looking for a way out.

She hadn't been awake for an hour before a man brought in a bowl of cloudy soup, a chunk of hard bread, and a large bucket of coppery tasting well water for Dylan to drink.

He didn't open the door to her prison, but slid the food through the spokes.

She snatched up her food and retreated to her fortification behind her bed to eat. Further searching and prodding of her cell yielded no results. She was locked in.

Time passed, although Dylan couldn't tell if it was night or day in the windowless room. The torches burned constantly, and when it appeared they might go out, replacements were brought in.

Dylan wasn't being fed enough; her stomach growled a consistent chorus whenever she was awake, but the kelpie was fed even less often than she.

Once every six of Dylan's meals, someone would throw a bucket of fish scales, guts, and carcasses at the kelpie. It was given water even less often—which explained why it looked especially hideous, even for a kelpie.

The undisturbed time gave her time to think and recall the sea witch's words.

What did she mean by 'End it this summer'? End what? She's keeping the storms up and supplementing her power through sacrifices of sea life. But as long as one kept away from the storms, there would be no impact, unless…

Dylan eyed the water horse as she adjusted herself into a more comfortable position. *Unless there is a human aspect to this as well. Why else would she have non-magical allies? That Jarlath fellow—the sea witch's chum. He's the ringleader of something.*

She tapped her fingers on stone. *Perhaps I was too hasty in having my voice sealed. But who knew what atrocities the sea witch would have tried to make me commit. Still, there is something to all of this…I just haven't heard the whole story. Yet.*

The door opened, and Jarlath swaggered in, accompanied by a tall, twiggy man. Dylan raised her eyebrows at him as he walked through the stone room and stopped in front of the bars that corralled her.

"By my best horse—you are deuced exotic," Jarlath said, shaking his head. "Summon a seamstress," Jarlath said, turning to his companion.

"But my lord. The lady mage Ys—"

"I know what she said, and I don't give a cow's rump. This selkie is in my charge, and if I say I want to take her to the Summer Palace, then I will take her to the Summer Palace."

"My lord, is that wise? She could escape!"

"She won't escape. I'll have someone guard her. Besides, I have her pelt, don't I? And it's not like she can tell anyone what's happening," Jarlath said. He released great hee-haws of laughter.

Dylan's heart buoyed to see that she wasn't the only stupid one on land. With great luck, Jarlath's stupidity would lead him to make a mistake, and Dylan *could* snag her pelt.

"Now sail off and go summon that seamstress. If we want to make the festival, the dress will need to be finished in two days," Jarlath said.

"Yes, my lord," the twiggy man sighed before he left the room, closing the door behind him.

"What do you think of my treasury, eh? I'm a collector of magical artifacts. You're a perfect addition, but it's a shame to keep you locked up here when I could show you off." Jarlath grinned.

Yes, he is an idiot, Dylan surmised. *Even for a lander.*

“Phew—do you smell. Although living with this beastie probably hasn’t made you smell any sweeter.” Jarlath turned to admire his half-dead water horse. “Maimed three men when we caught him. Deadly creature. But look, the fight is all out of him, just like it’s out of you. That’s the best way to beat magic, you know. Deprive it. ’Course you already went and deprived yourself, but still,” Jarlath chattered.

Dylan crossed her legs at the ankles and stared at her jailer. *I wonder if I could bite him through the bars…*

“So, I’ve decided to take you out to a little human party—a gatherin’,” Jarlath said with a slick, oily smile. “The royalty have arrived. They’re opening the Summer Palace for the season, which means parties and celebrations every week for the next month. We’ll be attending their arrival festival. That’ll be something to tell all your selkie sisters, eh? If you see ’em again. ’Course you prolly won’t—unless they’re dead,” Jarlath said.

In that moment, Dylan felt Jarlath was a little less hateful than the sea witch. *He’s so thick-headed, he gives me hope*. If he was to be her keeper, she would have an easier time snagging her pelt. Jarlath lacked the sea witch’s cunning, and he certainly had no magic to speak of, or he wouldn’t keep a *kelpie* in his home.

“A seamstress’ll come down here and measure you for a few dresses so you’ll look presentable. The Summer Palace ain’t far from here—two or three hours by carriage. We’ll ride out for the festival, spend the night, and be back the following day. No one will be the wiser, and *all* of Ringsted will see you.” Jarlath’s face shone with self-satisfaction. “But there’s gonna be some ground rules.” He walked to the door and left the room for a moment. He reappeared bearing an armload.

When Dylan saw what he had, she lunged at him through the bars, straining to reach him.

“Ah-ah! Not so fast, little fish,” Jarlath laughed, staying just out of reach as he unrolled the fuzzy, leathery looking pelt.

“This is yours, ain’t it?” He held Dylan’s pelt so it dangled. “My mage friend tells me that a hole or tear in this would mean you’d be human for the rest of your life.”

The sea witch is no *mage!* She snarled internally as she watched Jarlath with hate and unease.

“This is the deal. If you cause any trouble—try to tell someone what you are, say—I will rip this pelt from the nose to the flipper. You’ll be a land-bound selkie, dried up even worse than my beastie.” Jarlath gestured over his shoulder at the kelpie and rolled up her pelt. “And don’t think I won’t do it. ’Cuz I’m ruthless, little fish.” He slipped a hunting knife from his belt and scraped the fuzz on Dylan’s pelt.

Every muscle in her body was taut. Her heart pounded so loudly she could barely hear Jarlath, but panic howled in her at the sight of the dagger brushing so close to her pelt.

“To make sure you’re behaving, two of my men will be guarding you. Oisin, Morri! Get in here!”

The door swung open, and two men trod into the treasury. The first, a short, stocky man with a square face and a flat, broken nose, had a flat-ish, bald head so shiny, she wondered if light could bounce off it. He was thick and muscled, scrappy. The second man, as tall as the first was short, was just as thick and swarthy. He had to walk with his chest thrust out so his arms—the size of Dylan’s thighs—could hang at his sides. His bushy black hair stuck out in every direction so his head resembled a sea urchin. A similarly textured black beard hid most of his face and his short, thick neck.

After staring at them long enough, Dylan realized they were the men that held her back after she launched herself at the sea witch.

“Oisin and Morri will be your…*guards*, little fish.” To her relief, Jarlath put his dagger away. “They’ll stick to you like your seal skin. Make a single misstep, an’ they’ll tell me, ending your career as a seal shifter.”

“Sea lion,” the bigger fellow grunted.

“Whatever. Do we have an understanding?” Jarlath asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Dylan kept her gaze locked on her pelt as she nodded.

“Excellent. Get her out—the seamstress will show any minute. Keep an eye on her,” Jarlath said. He tossed her pelt over his shoulder and strode from the room.

Dylan’s bigger guard fumbled with a key and then swung her door open. She pushed herself against the rock wall at the back of her cell as he and the shorter man took up posts by the treasury door. After a minute passed and they didn’t move, she crept from her jail like a cautious fish leaving a reef. If they’d let her explore, she’d make the most of it. She

kept her eyes on her guards and slunk up and down the aisles formed between stacks of treasures.

I need a weapon or a tool. Something I could use later. But how do I get it when they watch me like predators?

When the guards moved again she froze. They opened the door to allow a thin, nervous-looking woman inside.

The woman, at least a head shorter than Dylan, looked her over for a few minutes with wide eyes. She eventually started measuring her, wrapping a knotted rope around her waist, up and down her arms and legs, and around her chest.

The seamstress came and went several times—returning with various fabrics—and took the big guard with her to carry things. The smaller guard remained behind. Whenever they were alone he tossed a dagger between his hands. His liquid, practiced gestures kept Dylan rooted to the ground where the seamstress had left her.

When the seamstress was there she held bolts of fabrics against Dylan's tall body, struggling to find one that had enough material. As the measuring dragged on, Dylan began to shed her caution, swapping it for anger with Jarlath.

You beat magic by depriving it, do you? She curled her hands into fists and glared at her bare feet. *You'll never beat me. Though I love my sea lion body, I can survive without it. I will see this through. I will figure out what you and the sea witch are doing, and I will stop you.*

The door opened, and the seamstress stuck her head inside long enough to whisper to the short guard.

He glanced at Dylan before he left the room, shutting the door behind him. Lest she get any ideas with both guards outside, there was a distinct thud as a latch settled in place over the door.

Dylan lurched into motion, searching through the piles of trinkets that Jarlath deemed treasure. She made her way to the swords gleaming with magic. Was there a dagger nearby?

She spotted two beneath the rim of a glimmering shield. The first dagger almost made her wretch. It was made of black metal and reeked of curses and black magic. Jarlath was an idiot for owning it, much less keeping it out in the open like this. Dylan used the shield to nudge it aside so she could snag the second.

The dagger was dull, and she didn't know how to sharpen it. While the selkies had weaponry, most of Dylan's responsibilities in terms of fighting and protection hinged on her powerful water-channeling abilities. *But a dull dagger is better than no dagger*. She snatched up the unornamented weapon, scurried across the treasury room, and darted into her barred-off prison. Hiding the dagger under her cot, she prayed no one would search her little room for weapons.

The seamstress and the guards weren't back, so Dylan turned her vengeful eye on the dried-out water horse. Before she knew what she was doing, she picked up her bucket of fresh water and stalked across the treasury.

The kelpie's curdled-milk-eyes moved to focus on Dylan, although it did not lift its head. *You are a twisted creature. But you are being held by a monster, and if you get a chance, I hope you snap his arm off.*

She didn't give herself a moment to rethink her plan—knowing that if she did, she would talk herself out of it. Dylan tossed her bucket of water on the kelpie, splashing its face, neck, and side. She hugged the bucket to her chest and darted backwards.

The kelpie didn't move for several moments. Finally its ears lifted, and it blinked its sunken eyes as its skin soaked up the water like a sponge.

Dylan heard a female voice outside the door, and she ran to place her bucket inside her cell. Then she lunged towards the spot she had stood when the short guard left. She had just enough time to fix her belt and toss her wild hair over her shoulder before the door swung open, and the seamstress and guards trooped inside.

The kelpie acted no different the rest of the day, but Dylan wasn't fooled. Water horses were cunning creatures.

That evening, Dylan's guards escorted her up to a bedroom in stony silence, evicting her from her cell in the treasury. She managed to smuggle her dagger up, carrying it in a blanket she insisted on holding. It was just as well she hadn't carried it on her person, for the servants shoved Dylan into a lukewarm bath of suds and kept her there for what felt like hours.

They finally let her out, only to hold her captive in her room, bored and famished, until the following day when the seamstress appeared with a

dress and a looking glass.

The seamstress bundled her into a new, clean shirt styled similarly to the one she already wore, although this one was much shorter, and the sleeves were long and droopy. The seamstress then stuffed her into a sleeveless gown that was a saffron color before placing the mirror in front of her. The finished look included a pair of black buckled shoes that made Dylan's feet sweat and itch.

She didn't know much about human fashion, but she suspected the orange-yellow color was not very complimentary. Although it looked well enough on her bronzed, sun-kissed skin, it made her hair appear more coppery than normal. Her hair was dark brown but was sun-bleached, so the top layer of her hair was gold or (if one was being uncharitable) orange. Her hair, kinked in tight curls like dry seaweed, fell just below her shoulder blades in a wild mess. Dylan's eyes—which were sea glass green with swirls of ocean blue—looked odd against the orange of her gown.

She looked down at the seamstress and raised an eyebrow, but the woman didn't notice and fussed with the fabric of the gown.

Jarlath entered Dylan's rooms a few minutes later. "Good enough," he declared. "I'll take another if you think you can finish it in time. A lady needs a change of clothes, eh?"

"Yes, my lord," the seamstress mewed as she bobbed in a curtsey.

"What do you think, little fish? This time tomorrow we'll be taking in the delights of the Summer Palace. You'll be the talk of the town—with your exotic eyes and all," Jarlath said, coming to stand next to her.

He was several inches shorter than she was, highlighting her height even more than the seamstress's petite body did.

He's an idiot, and *he's off his waves*, Dylan decided as Jarlath held his belly and laughed. *But I'm glad. I hope he is just as careless tomorrow.*

Chapter 4
Festivals and Food

The carriage ride was…not fun. It didn't make Dylan ill—she had a stomach of iron from swimming upside down and backwards and playing in the undercurrents of typhoons and storms—but the walls of the carriage seemed to close in, as if they were planning to crush her over course of the drive. It was too small of space with no fresh air.

Jarlath, Dylan's guards, and a number of other men surrounded the carriage on horseback. She didn't envy their freedom. Being in a stuffy box was bad, but not so terrible that she would want to ride a creature that even slightly resembled a kelpie.

How long will this go on? My teeth ache from all the rattling. Although it was fascinating to witness the green pastures and forests—for Dylan was used to a world bathed in blue—the traveling wore on her. She would have sung with joy if she could have when Jarlath spurred his prancing mare closer to the carriage.

"There it is, little fish," he said, as they left the thinning forest. "The Summer Palace."

Dylan poked her head out of the carriage and squinted in the brilliant sunlight to catch a glimpse of the location where she would—hopefully—steal her pelt back from Jarlath.

The Summer Palace was nothing like Jarlath's castle or the structures sketched out in Mairead's books. It sprawled over steep hills, stretching in three separate directions. The main section of the palace rested atop the highest point of the hill, where it could bask in the sun all day long. Four towers marked the four compass points around it, tall and thin, like sea urchin spines. A smaller section was nestled on a beach, perched behind a sea wall, and a larger section was built on cliffs that overlooked an impressive marina.

Dylan almost bolted.

Not because the beauty of the palace, but because of the ocean—which stretched across the horizon like a field of aquamarine.

I'm so close! Maybe I could steal away and test the water—someone might recognize me! I could call for help…oh. No, I can't.

"It is beautiful," Jarlath said, wrongly misinterpreting Dylan's slumped shoulders and sigh of longing. "Don't suppose you've ever seen anything half as costly before."

I have, Dylan thought as the ocean was obscured by a hill. *And I gave up my voice to protect it.*

Serenaded by the faint crashing of waves, Dylan sagged against the carriage wall as Jarlath and his men led the way into a pleasant village picturesquely arranged in front of the Summer Palace. A large wall divided the village from the palace, but she didn't think she would have any problems scaling it.

As such, when the carriage rolled to a stop outside a house-like building made of rock, Dylan flung the carriage door open and sprinted in the direction of the wall.

The troll-sized man of her bodyguard duo was off his mount and waiting for her. He let her crash into him and applied an arm to her sternum, knocking all air out of her.

"Morri? Is everything alright?" Jarlath peered around the carriage with a scowl.

"Right as rain," the bodyguard rumbled as Dylan tried to suck air back into her lungs.

Tomorrow morning—before anyone rises. I will see you, my friend, Dylan thought while her guard dragged her past whitewashed shops and flapping Ringsted flags, as if the ocean could hear her.

"We're staying here, at the Owl's Hoot," Jarlath said, shielding his face from saffron and emerald ribbons that were tied to poles and slapped the air. He pointed to what passed as a lander inn.

Dylan gave the structure a quick glance. She was more interested in watching what Jarlath's men did with the leather valise that had been strapped to his mare's rump for the ride.

"The festival started—what luck! I'll make a big splash when I arrive with you at my tail. Move on," Jarlath said. He grabbed one of Dylan's wrists and yanked her through the village and into a cloud of noise, making her lose sight of his valise.

People lined the village streets like clams on the ocean floor. They laughed, shouted, and clapped in beat with the music. Many were ringed

around a crowded dance floor—polished wood raised a few inches above the cobblestone courtyard.

The musicians played unfamiliar instruments—although she did recognize the flute and violin because of drawings she had seen in books—and the movements of the dances were utterly foreign. The dancers kept their bodies straight and barely moved their arms, tapping the floor and kicking their heels in swift, crisp waves.

Fascinating. Dylan watched the dancers as they formed two lines and ducked together. Selkie dances were much more smooth and liquid, not so…bouncy.

She skirted a child waving a sword in the air and eyed Jarlath's back as he towed her along. *He's carrying a satchel*, she realized, noticing the small bag tucked under his other arm. *Could he have my pelt rolled up and stored there? King Murron's crest—please let the man be that stupid.*

Dylan watched and waited for the perfect opportunity. When Jarlath stood on his tip-toes—inspecting the crowd—she let a buxom village woman bump into her. Dylan was flung into Jarlath's back, nearly knocking him over.

"Get off! You're deuced clumsy, you know?" Jarlath complained. He was distracted enough that he didn't notice when she tried pinching his flimsy case. The satchel gave.

Not my pelt. Dylan felt paper documents crease through the worn fabric. Disappointment knifed through her just as hunger gnawed in her stomach as the zing of sweet-spiced meats and the lip-smacking aroma of cooked oysters teased her nose. *I* hate *being on land*, she decided.

"Jarlath! You've dragged yourself here, have you?" a ruddy-faced man shouted above the celebration. "How's Kingsgrace? Hallo—who is this?" He staggered up to Jarlath and Dylan with the gait of someone already deep in his cup.

"Hallo, Doyle. She's the latest addition to my collection. What do you think?" Jarlath grinned.

"She's deuced tall," the man said, sagging his head back on his neck to look up at Dylan. "What have you fed her to make her like the Chronos Mountains—I'll be jiggered!" He staggered another step backwards. "Coy, I ain't never seen eyes like that. Where'd you dig her up?"

"It was a troublesome effort, but I believe the extension of my collection is worth it," Jarlath said, his voice smug.

You did nothing, you red-faced-lubber. Dylan rolled her eyes.

"Kingsgrace! Didn't think you'd come—I thought the royals snubbed you at the Frost Ball." Another man—this one built like a slender sardine—yelled as he popped out of the crowd. He whistled when he got a look at Dylan. "Hallo there, *darlin*'!"

"Eyes off my goods, Teige. This one ain't passing through your harbor," Jarlath growled, although his lips formed a pleased smirk. "She's a sight, ain't she?"

"She's *something*," the sardine fellow said, gawking at her face.

Dylan didn't understand what the men were fussing over. Yes, she looked different from normal humans. She was markedly taller, and her eyes were an unusual color, but who cared? It was like comparing spots on a selkie seal pelt. Each seal had its own pattern, so what did the spot arrangement matter? *It must be a lander trait,* Dylan thought. *A* rude *lander trait. They keep staring at me like a fisherman gawks at his prized catch*.

"Doyle, be a good man and take this," Jarlath said, passing his cloth valise off to his ruddy-faced friend.

"Oh, is this the list of goods—"

"Shhh, yes. But we'll not talk of it here," Jarlath said.

"Not with the royal shadow on us," the sardine fellow said, glancing over his shoulder to sniff at the Summer Palace.

"Right. But we can toast to our success, can't we?"

Jarlath grinned. "Aye, we can." He released Dylan so he could pick up a mug of ale in each meaty fist. "Don't wander too far, little fish. Oisin and Morri are trailin' you," Jarlath said. He tossed back a drink and turned back to his friends.

"So does this gem of yours talk?" sardine man asked Jarlath as he pointed to Dylan.

Freed, she was torn between giving into her growling stomach, or trying to give her guards the slip and flee to the ocean. *I should seek out the ocean, but…* Dylan's stomach twisted painfully and growled.

"Nope, she's as silent as a mute," Jarlath said. "Best kind of woman."

"Better than those rowdy bandits," the ruddy-faced man said. "They *keep* trashin' my ship even after I talked to them."

"For the love of—won't you learn? Keep it down, fool!" Jarlath snarled.

When Dylan's stomach rumbled so loudly with hunger that it caused both of her bodyguards to stare at her, she decided it was probably in her best interest to eat before making another attempt to slip away. *I haven't had a decent meal since I got caught. Nitwit Jarlath and his plan to starve the magical*.

She slunk away from Jarlath—still lecturing his friend—and grabbed the first food item closest to her—fish dipped in batter and grilled to a crispy perfection.

Dylan polished off her fish in moments—careful for bones—and considered her next move. Her guards stood nearby—the smaller one a bump on the ground, the bigger one a larger lump. Both had stone-bored expressions on their faces.

If I ate everything on this table, the bigger one would still outweigh me, Dylan thought—tearing into a loaf of rye bread. *Better wait until I'm alone with the smaller one—although he did have an unsettling amount of finesse with his dagger. Still, he might be easier to escape. I don't imagine he can toss daggers freely in this crowd.*

As Dylan eyed her guards and dwelled upon possible ways to escape them, she feasted to her heart's content. She had oysters simmered in some kind of amber-colored liquid, lobster, creamy potatoes, two different kinds of soup, and two loaves of rye quick breads.

She chewed the last hunk of her second loaf of rye bread as she watched the dancers whirl around the dance floor. *Could I lose them by the dancers? Maybe they'll get distracted.*

Dylan grabbed a few more pieces of grilled fish and wandered towards the dance floor. Hoping to lure her guards into a false sense of security, she was careful to tilt her head and gaze curiously as the dance master shouted out the next dance and the steps that would be in it.

As Dylan publically gaped, her gaze fell on a young man. He was perhaps a few years older than her and possessed sand-colored hair—the kind that could be the soft beige of a dried beach in the afternoon sun, or the darker brown-tan color of wet sand at twilight. He had hazel eyes and wore a pleasant, open smile.

He looks familiar, Dylan thought as she ate her fish. *But I've seen only a few dozen humans in my life. Maybe he was with the merchants Ma met with last time she allowed me to go trading with her.*

His identity was like an itch Dylan couldn't scratch when she was swimming as a sea lion. *He can't be a selkie—he's too short and land-like. Is he a friend of Da's? No—Maili would have fallen for a face as pretty as his, and all the humans Da knows are near his age.*

She was close to huffing in frustration and didn't notice when the dance ended. *He can't be anyone important. Maybe he's one of Jarlath's men.*

"May I have this dance?" someone shouted in her ear.

Dylan turned, blinking in shock when she found the sand-haired dancer next to her. He was her height—perhaps a finger's thickness shorter than her. Standing this close to him, she could see flecks of green and gold in his hazel eyes, bright and pretty.

She opened and closed her mouth, wondering how she could refuse him. She turned to look at her guards, but the bump and the lump were as stone-faced as ever.

"Come on," the dancer said, taking Dylan's arm and leading her forward. "If we wait any longer, we'll miss the instructions."

Instead of having to elbow their way through the crowd, folks moved aside for Dylan and the dancer. The dance master even bobbed a bow in their direction before he started shouting out the directions as the other dancers gave them curious glances.

Dylan bounced in place to see if the dagger she'd stolen from Jarlath's treasury—she had it tucked into the belt of her white undershirt, hidden beneath her gown—wiggled or moved. It didn't.

"If you don't know the dance, just follow my lead. As long as you move in sync, you'll be fine. We repeat five basic moves for the duration of the song," the dancer said as the music started.

Dylan watched the other dancers as they stood in a square—one couple on each side—and started dancing. Her movements were a little sluggish as she noted the way the dancers tapped the ground. Their hops were lower, and they didn't kick like all the previous dances did, but the pattern was easier to follow because they moved their feet to a specific beat.

Within a minute Dylan picked up the beat and let her partner lead her, turning her to face him when necessary. He led her forward when they danced in a circle like the spokes of a cart wheel.

After they went through all the movements, she had the dance down and was able to start enjoying herself in spite of her troubles. It wasn't

anything like a traditional selkie dance, but selkies—naturally graceful—enjoyed *all* kinds of dance. Unable to stop herself, Dylan added twirls and flourishes whenever she could, silently laughing with joy when her fellow dancers picked up the speed of their tapping and hopping.

The song ended before Dylan wanted it to. Her forehead was damp with sweat, but she grinned widely, filled with mirth. She bowed to her partner, hoping to convey her thanks before she hopped from the platform.

The dancer followed her, and the two of them almost walked straight into Jarlath, sending her good spirits plummeting.

"Your Highness, I see you have met my newest acquisition," Jarlath said, his chest inflated like a puffer fish.

"Acquisition, Lord Jarlath? Even you have better manners than that. I assume you meant to say you are her escort?" the dancer asked.

Dylan smirked. *Too bad he's not a selkie friend. He's fun.*

"Escort is a bit…she's not a lady, Your Highness. Just my…ward," Jarlath said.

"Even so, could I bother you for an introduction?"

"Ah, of course," Jarlath said, looking uncomfortable for a minute. "Your Highness, please allow me to introduce you to my ward…Miss… um, I call her…"

"Dylan," Dylan's big guard—the lump—grunted.

This drew Dylan's wonder. Only the sea witch had indicated any knowledge of Dylan since she was taken captive. How had the lump known? Did he actually pay attention—unlike his employer?

"Yes, Miss Dylan," Jarlath said, recovering with a smile. "Dylan, this is His Royal Highness, Prince Callan, the eldest prince of Ringsted."

The oldest prince? Maybe I have seen his face in a painting or something. No matter—he will be bossy Maureen's concern when she takes Da's place and becomes Queen of the Selkies.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Dylan," the prince said.

Jarlath and the prince stared at Dylan, expecting her to do something. Behind the prince's back, Jarlath mimicked a bow.

Dylan bent deeply.

"I apologize for her silence, Your Highness, but she is, uh, a mute," Jarlath said.

“Is she, now?” the dancing prince said, studying Dylan with intense scrutiny, making the gold in his eyes glitter. He broke his gaze from Dylan and turned to face Jarlath. “Were you intending to head home to Kingsgrace Castle?”

“I hoped to spend the evening at the Owl’s Hoot and return on the morrow, Your Highness.”

“I ask you to reconsider. We would love to have you at the palace for the opening season,” Prince Callan said.

Reconsider? Dylan shifted, hope bubbling in her like a spring. *The palace is just by the ocean—and Jarlath cannot possibly keep me cooped up there!*

Jarlath’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “Truly, Your Highness?”

“Absolutely, both of you,” Prince Callan said. “I’ll send a servant up to the palace. They will prepare rooms for you. When you finish with the festivities here, please make your way up. The chamberlain will show you to your quarters.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Jarlath said, bowing deeply. “I’m sure we will enjoy it!”

Dylan nodded, for the first—and only—time, agreeing with her captor.

“I am gladdened to hear that,” Prince Callan said with a smile.

“Callan!” a young lady said, breathing heavily as she slipped into place next to the prince, laying a hand on his arm. “There you are. I was wondering where you went.”

The lady had bright blonde hair the color of the sun and brown eyes. She was dainty and delicate with pale skin—standing next to bronze-skinned Dylan highlighted all of this.

She must be pretty, Dylan decided, glancing at Jarlath, who almost drooled.

“Lady Aisling, how good it is to see you,” Jarlath said with a deep bow.

“Lord Jarlath,” the lady said before returning her attention to the prince. “Come, Mother wants to greet you properly, and you’ve avoided us too long!”

“As you say. I look forward to your stay, Lord Jarlath, Miss Dylan,” the prince said, giving both of them a smile before he turned. He seemed to be holding the arm that Lady Aisling clung to away from his body. Within a moment, he was swallowed into the crowd.

“Now *that* is a woman,” Jarlath whistled at their departure. “Prettiest girl in all of Ringsted, right there. Only the best for the prince, I suppose. No matter. Well done, little fish. Your exotic looks are a spot more useful than I thought! Now where did Teige run off to?”

It wasn’t until almost the midnight bell that Jarlath decided they should retire from the festival. Dylan was reluctant to leave—more trays of food kept appearing—but she followed a staggering Jarlath and a bald servant through the palace.

Jarlath could barely place one foot in front of the other and required one of his men to help him walk.

The royal servant showed Jarlath to his room first, his face pinched with distaste as Jarlath’s men dragged him inside.

Dylan’s room was across the hallway and four doors down from Jarlath’s. The servant opened her door, handed her a key, and bowed to her before trotting off. Dylan poked her head inside and was wowed by the size of the room and the furnishings. Although Dylan was a selkie princess, her family was not much more elevated in terms of wealth or possessions than normal selkies. There were small things that showed her family’s power—Mairead’s books, Murphy’s boat, the fact that she had her own room, things like that. But even though she was the daughter of the selkie king, Dylan had never been in a room as nice as this.

A plush bed with goose-feather pillows and satin sheets stood against the far wall, and an armoire, a sea chest, a short table, and a padded chair graced the room as well. A fur rug lay on the floor near the fireplace, and heavy velvet drapes hung over a glass window. It was the window Dylan prized the most in the exquisite room, for it gave her a view of the moonlit ocean.

She lurched across the room and struggled to open the window, clawing at it until the salty brine smell of the ocean swept inside.

I miss them. Father, Mother, my sisters—even Maureen. It’s horrifying to be alone. Dylan hugged herself and listened to the waves crash on the shore—a familiar lullaby.

She leaned on the windowsill, taking comfort in the ocean noises. When she grew so exhausted she could barely keep her eyes open, she

shuffled through her room and found the other dress the seamstress made for her—this one the red of a ripe strawberry—hanging in the armoire.

Dylan plopped onto her large bed, squirming into a tight ball. *I wonder how long we are to stay, how long I have to steal my pelt*. She twisted, feeling chilled—not from the chill in the air, but the emptiness of the room. Even though she had her own bedroom, usually Dylan slept with Murphy and Muriel, piled with her sisters like tired seal pups.

Tomorrow, I will enter the ocean. Dylan squeezed her eyes shut. *And I will begin my battle.*

Chapter 5
Breakfast with the Royals

Dylan woke just before dawn, bright-eyed and brimming with determination. *The ocean!* She bounded across her room to lean out her open window. Once she reached the water, she would be able to tell if her family was nearby. Although determined to reclaim her pelt on her own, Dylan knew her parents would be worried about her—and Angelique was right. They needed to be informed about Jarlath.

She dressed in her saffron dress again and sniffed hopefully around her room for food. Finding none, she crossed the hallway to Jarlath's room.

Poking her head inside revealed the man was still in bed, moaning about sunlight and loud noises, so Dylan took extra care to slam the door shut as loudly as possible before trotting down the halls.

Her guards—Bump and Lump—followed behind her, surprisingly swift and quiet given their considerable girth.

The twisting corridors of the castle all looked alike to Dylan, but she followed her ears and managed to find a path outside. The path circled inside the large sea wall built around the palace. Even though Dylan walked it twice, she found no exit. No path led down to the beach.

Dylan re-entered the palace, took a spiral staircase down a floor and tried again with no luck. She searched every floor but couldn't find a way past the sea wall. Frustrated, she took the walkway up to the main section of the palace. The walkway was wide enough for two carriages to roll down side by side, and part of it was sheltered. But as the weather was warm and the summer sun was bright, Dylan walked in the open air section, occasionally stopping to hang over the walkway and look down at the craggy rocks below.

Whoever built this castle should be smacked. How do I get down there? She wanted so badly to feel grains of sand on her skin and splash salty ocean water in to the air, she considered climbing her way down the rocks. *Wait—the marina!*

Dylan made her way with a dogged determination to the third palace wing—the one perched on rocks with piers jutted up against it like the

train of a dress. In high spirits, Dylan skirted the palace and jumped a set of four stairs, launching herself into the marina, only to discover it was closed.

Blast! Servants swarmed the place like schools of fish, arranging tables and chairs and occasionally giving her—and her rough-looking escorts—curious glances. A rope hung across the marina entrance—but when Dylan spotted a pathway of rock cut into the cliff-side that went from the marina down to the beach, she tucked her chin and pushed her way in, starting down the treacherous path.

She heard Bump—the short, stocky guard—grunt once or twice as both men stepped on slick stone to follow her. Dylan jumped the last three steps and landed in the sand with a thump. "Oi!" Lump shouted with alarm.

She abandoned her itchy shoes on a rock, tied her skirts up, and waded into the water up to her knees.

Dylan felt her world click into place. All of her senses simultaneously focused and spread. She could feel the whales singing far off, their song thrumming in her bones. She could feel the wave patterns of the water, the splash of otters playing farther down the coast. And ever so distantly, she heard the crooning of selkies in their seal bodies.

I'm here! Dylan opened her mouth to call to the ocean and her kin, but no sound came out.

Regret dropped over her like a heavy weight. She felt cut off and alone. She didn't know what was worse: being without her family, or knowing that her mistake was what put her—and her unknowing kinsmen—in this position. Her eyes ached, and she curled her hands into shaking fists.

It was useless. Dylan had no way to contact her family. If she could use her voice, they would hear her, or—at the very least—hear the water reacting to her voice's unique magic.

The voices are distant. They have to be miles down the coast—I could never reach them. Dylan's shoulders slumped with this unexpected defeat. *But…that doesn't mean I am powerless.* She could search Jarlath's room for her pelt and for anything that might detail his relationship with the sea witch. *I should have snatched up his valise yesterday. I won't make that mistake again.*

Buoyed by her new conviction, Dylan raised her chin and stared up at the sky. She couldn't leave the water—it felt too right. She waded deeper in the ocean, her head cocked as she listened to whales sing, sea lions bark,

and sea birds shriek. The sounds were a balm to her, soothing her unsettled heart and wrapping her like a warm blanket, promising her everything would turn out right.

The sun was significantly higher when a voice broke Dylan's reverie.

"Miss Dylan?"

Dylan turned around, shielding her eyes to find Prince Callan standing on shore behind her. He wore a plain, cotton shirt, practical boots spattered with wet sand, and black breeches.

Behind him, Bump and Lump sat on rocks that fell in the shade of the encroaching forest. They watched Dylan—and the prince—without stirring.

Dylan gave the open ocean one last look of longing and trudged through the water. Ankle deep, she undid the knot of her skirts and curtsied.

Prince Callan smiled. "You look like a sea nymph communing with the ocean this early in the morning."

Dylan raised her eyebrows at him and fought to push her wild, kinked hair over her shoulder.

Prince Callan cleared his throat. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

Dylan shook her head.

"Then would you care to join me? My father and two of my siblings are about to eat," he motioned toward the palace. "They are waiting for me to return from my run so we can eat together."

At the mention of food, Dylan perked up, her empty stomach knifing her gut. She nodded brightly, drawing a smile from the prince.

"Then may I escort you there?" he asked, dipping at the waist and offering his hand.

Dylan stared at his hand, confused. Why was he holding out his hand? *Am I supposed to do something with it?* He clearly expected some sort of action from her. Perhaps she should offer him a gift. Dylan waded back in the water and plunged a hand beneath the surface. She picked up a long, thin, white shell shaped almost like a bird's wing—angel wing. Large ones like this were rare since they broke so easily, but she had felt its presence earlier.

Dylan returned and set the shell in the prince's palm.

The prince stared at the shell for a few moments and blinked twice. The corners of his lips barely turned upwards, but she could see laughter in

his glittering hazel eyes when they met hers. “Thank you,” he said. “You’re very kind.”

She patted the air, trying to refute his comment.

Prince Callan shook his head before holding out his arm.

This signal, Dylan recognized. She placed her hand on his arm, although she fumbled for a while to try and find a comfortable position.

Bump and Lump rose from their rocks while she reclaimed her shoes. She thought the prince would lead her back to the treacherous seaside steps, but instead Prince Callan led the way to the sea wall.

Callan moved towards the forest, taking her to a wooden boardwalk raised above the sand and forest. The boardwalk inclined upwards, going up with the trees before it rejoined the palace, making it over the sea wall.

“There are several entrances and exits,” Prince Callan said, noting the way Dylan gawked and tried to pinpoint their location as they stepped off the boardwalk and onto a palace patio. “This one is the most grand—although a portion of it is designed to collapse in case of pirates or bandits, so it isn’t up every day,” he said, taking her indoors.

The room was bright with morning sun and covered from wall to wall with bookshelves and books.

Mairead would love *this*, Dylan thought as Prince Callan tugged her to a spiral staircase.

They popped out in a beautiful, fan-shaped room. The circular edge of the room was constructed of glass, giving a breathtaking view of the ocean on one side and the sun rising over the thick forest on the other.

The floor was covered with an ocean-blue rug that had a pattern of shells and waves cresting the edge. In the center of the room stood a rectangular table. The legs were ornately carved with swelling waves, whales, fish, and even a seal or two. Three of the chairs at the table were occupied.

A man Dylan recognized as King Rory sat at the head of the table—he had given a speech during the festival the previous night with his wife, Queen Etain. A teenage boy sat on the long side of the rectangle. A little girl who couldn’t have been older than eight sat next to him, kicking her feet. When the little girl looked up and saw them, she brightened.

“Callan!” she called, her curious eyes falling on Dylan. “Who is she?”

“Miss Dylan, may I introduce you to my family: my father, King Rory; my brother, Prince Viggo; and my youngest sister, Princess Nessa. This is

Miss Dylan, Lord Jarlath's ward."

With the majority of the royal family lined up, Dylan could see the family resemblance. Both Prince Callan and Prince Viggo shared the strong, handsome features of their father, although Callan was built more lean and limber than his sturdy father and brother.

Still, just because he's lean doesn't mean he doesn't weigh as much as an anchor. I remember that man I saved. He—that man I saved. She narrowed her eyes and turned to stare at Prince Callan's body.

He had the same build—broad shoulders narrowing into a lean torso. His face had been hard to see in the dark, but Dylan thought—no—she was certain now. Prince Callan was the man she saved from the shipwreck two years ago. Now that she thought about it, she remembered the short glimpses she had of his hazel eyes flecked with green and gold as she sang to him and waited for someone to find him.

Does he remember? No, he couldn't. He never really woke up. Besides, I'm certain he was addled, being tossed about as he was. Still, to think I saved a prince.

"Oh, you're the one who doesn't talk," Viggo said and then blanched. "No offense. I meant—"

Dylan flashed a white grin at the younger prince, hoping to communicate that no harm was done.

"Very good," King Rory said, rubbing the bags under his eyes as he motioned servants forward.

Dylan sat next to Callan—who sat across from his brother, on his father's open side—and almost jumped when a servant presented a white cloth to her. Dylan glanced at Callan—who used the towel to wipe off his hands—and copied him before handing the cloth back to the servant.

The servant curtsied, disappeared, and was replaced by another servant bearing food.

"Why don't you talk?" Princess Nessa asked, peering over the table.

"Nessa," the king said, his voice tired. "Are they hers?" he asked, flicking a finger at the staircase Dylan and Callan had climbed. Dylan twisted around to see Bump and Lump stationed like statues at the stairs.

"Yes," Prince Callan confirmed as the dishes were slid into place and uncovered.

The first round of food was goose, duck, and chicken eggs that were poached, fried, and scrambled. Dylan waited until everyone had served

themselves before trying a bit of each.

"I believe the festival was a success. The closing ceremony went well," Prince Callan said. "I hope the marina opening tonight goes just as well."

"Yes, even if it is more than a little superfluous to open it. Until those typhoons die down, our trading is dead in the water. Even our two weather mages can't force their way through the storms now," King Rory said, his mouth a grim slash. "It was only good luck that Viggo made it back in time from the wedding of those Erlauf royals."

Weather mages can't get through? Dylan tried to open her mouth to ask and glared at her plate when no noise came out.

"Why can't *I* attend the marina opening?" Princess Nessa asked.

"Because you're too young," Prince Viggo said. Princess Nessa stuck her tongue out at him, and Prince Viggo playfully sneered back at her. "You're not missing anything. It's dead boring," he added.

"You're just saying that," Princess Nessa said.

"Am not. Would *you* like to listen to grownups talk about exports and imports and gross national product?" Prince Viggo asked. "I'd much rather be riding."

Dylan helped herself to two biscuits from the tray of bread as she watched the brother and sister. Viggo wasn't much over fifteen, but the way he played with his sibling reminded Dylan of her sisters. Dylan sighed wistfully and leaned back in her chair as she remembered swimming with Maili, Muriel, Murphy, Mairead, and Maureen. It was always so much fun to twirl through kelp and seaweed with her sisters.

Stop it. Pay attention! Dylan shook her head to clear it. *There's no sense sighing over memories when I have my pelt to seek. Besides, it wasn't that picture perfect. Bossy Maureen would never leave me be when we swam!*

"You were confident last night, Father. If you act the same tonight, I don't think anyone else will catch on to your worry," Prince Callan said.

"Perhaps not, but they know it. They must know it. We're a trading country that's been forcibly isolated. Our most powerful families all own trading companies. This weather hurts them, and it hurts us all. Banditry is on the rise—probably due to all the unemployed sailors. And they're making a killing," King Rory said, shredding a piece of toast.

"How?" Prince Viggo asked. "We don't land trade. At all."

“You are correct. The Chronos Mountains prevent land trade routes with other countries. *But,* all our inner-Ringsted trading must be shipped from one end of the country to the other by land traders, since the boats are stranded,” King Rory said.

Dylan took in the defeated slump to his posture as she ate some elderberries—they were out of season, but she suspected they had been frozen over the winter, for they were iced—like a desert. The conversation paused as the royals chewed, and she longed to have a voice to prod it onward.

Bandits? Land trading? Someone, please ask for more information. Or comment on it. Anything! Curse my unspeaking tongue—I want to know!

“I wouldn’t be so sure the bandits are out-of-work sailors,” Prince Callan finally said. “It’s unfair to blame it on them. Besides, our sailors are the good sort. I don’t think they would turn to marauding.”

“Perhaps not,” King Rory sighed.

“You eat a lot,” Princess Nessa said, looking at Dylan with curious eyes.

Prince Callan froze next to Dylan, but Dylan nodded in acknowledgement and offered the princess a slice of dried apple from her plate.

Princess Nessa grinned and took the slice. She popped it in her mouth before offering Dylan a funny-looking pastry she had been trying to avoid.

Dylan reluctantly tried the pastry, surprised to find it was sweet and flavored with honey. She smiled at Princess Nessa and nodded in thanks.

The princess giggled and ate a mouthful of eggs.

Prince Callan looked from Dylan to Princess Nessa, a bemused smile on his lips, but the king hadn’t even noticed the exchange.

“We must hope the Veneno Conclave will soon have time to investigate these storms—to be so unmoving is unnatural. And their position is disconcerting,” King Rory said before eating a piece of toast.

“And the storms continue to build,” Prince Callan added, picking at his eggs.

So the storms stop country business, er, trading. Based on the king’s posture, I would say it must be terrible. I wish *they would talk more about it. And how do they not shrivel up and starve, eating as little as they do?*
Dylan looked back and forth between King Rory and Prince Callan.

“What function are we throwing tomorrow night?” Prince Viggo asked.

“A royal dinner, I think,” King Rory said, his brow puckering. “Your mother is organizing it.”

“Yes,” Prince Callan confirmed. “Although I believe it is, above all else, an opportunity for the ladies to parade their beauty about.”

Wait! What about the storms and bandits?

“I thought that’s what tonight’s marina opening is for.” Prince Viggo frowned.

“Tonight is for the nobilities involved with trading. The festival was for the commoners,” Prince Callan said.

“Then when do we get to do something for us *men*?” Prince Viggo asked. “Like…a riding party?”

“Not in the first week, I’m afraid. Sorry, son,” King Rory said with a half smile. “You could always organize your own outing. Just be sure to take some guards. All these *bandits*,” King Rory growled.

WHAT BANDITS! I was a dunce for asking Angelique to seal my voice —by a humpback’s tail!

“That’s a jolly idea,” Prince Viggo brightened.

“Can I come?” Princess Nessa asked.

“No,” King Rory said.

“Perhaps you would like to join the party, Miss Dylan?” Prince Callan asked. “I would guard your safety myself. And your…companions…are welcome to come along as well,” he said, glancing back at Bump and Lump.

Dylan almost choked on her shrimp, caught off guard by the sudden offer. She took a sip of her apple cider before shaking her head at Prince Callan.

“Are you sure?” Prince Viggo asked. “I could lend you a horse, if you don’t have one. I have a nice mare I was planning to let Nessa use when she gets big enough. She’s calm and steady.”

Dylan gave the prince a tight smile, but shook her head as she finished her dried apple slices.

Princess Nessa watched Dylan curiously. “I’ll be right back,” she announced and pushed her chair away from the table. She ran across the room and thundered down the spiral staircase, narrowly avoiding Bump and Lump.

“Don’t run indoors,” King Rory called after his wayward child. “Where’s Fianna?” he asked, looking down the table with a frown.

“Still sleeping,” Prince Viggo said.

“She was up until the festival ended, I think,” Prince Callan said.

King Rory’s frown deepened. “Was she still swooning over that Logan chap?”

“Son of the Lord and Lady of Twin Falls? Yes,” Prince Viggo snickered.

“Your mother should talk with her,” King Rory said. He grimaced. “Perhaps we should both talk with her.”

Dylan polished off her last roll with a bemused smile. Although there were more differences between humans and selkies than she would have thought possible, it seemed that family conversation was similar. Dylan had also spent many days crowded around the table with her parents and five sisters, talking about everything from clan matters to boys—to her father’s chagrin.

Princess Nessa galloped back up the stairs, holding something flat above her head, with a pouch hanging from her wrist. “I found it! I got the smallest one—it’s easiest to carry.”

“What do you have, Nessa?” King Rory eyed his youngest child.

“A slate—and chalk!” Nessa said, plopping the slate and pouch on the table.

Dylan recognized the items from her childhood—she had learned to write on a slate instead of wasting costly paper. Dylan suspected that was the point of this particular slate as well, as there was evidence of lines drawn on for the young princess to practice on.

Thank you, thank you—bless you, child. As soon as I get my voice back, I will tell everything in the sea to love and adore you! Dylan took the slate with a big smile.

“Nessa, that might not be—” Prince Callan started. He cut himself off when Dylan opened the pouch and selected a piece of chalk so she could write.

Thank you.

Princess Nessa beamed. “Of course! Now we can talk! Do you have any siblings? Are they sisters? I always wished Callan was a girl. He’s more fun than Fianna, but he’d be even more fun if he were a girl.”

Prince Callan shook his head, amused.

“Nessa!” Prince Viggo groaned.

“It is a good idea.” King Rory said.

“To make Callan a girl? Can we call him Claire?”

“No, the slate and chalk,” her father said, entertained.

“Oh, well, it was obvious. Nurse has told me the story of the beauty and the beast a hundred times—it’s my favorite bedtime tale.”

“You mean Prince Severin and Princess Elle of Loire?” Prince Callan asked.

“Sure,” Nessa said. “Anyway, the beast’s servants cannot talk—because of his curse, you know? So in order to communicate with the beauty, they used chalkboards.”

A wise idea. Dylan sipped delicious tea served from a dainty cup.

“You *do* know that story is real. Right, Nessa?” Prince Viggo asked.

“You can’t fool me, Viggo. I’m not a baby,” Nessa said, folding her arms across her chest. “Next, you’ll try to tell me that selkies are real!”

Dylan inhaled her tea and broke into a coughing fit.

“Are you alright, dear?” King Rory asked, concern creasing his lips as Dylan coughed on.

Dylan nodded and gulped a goblet of fresh water to clear her throat.

“Selkie lore is part of our culture, Nessa,” Prince Callan said. He watched Dylan with concern and refilled her goblet with water from a crystal pitcher.

“Everyone knows they’re just bed-time stories for babies,” Princess Nessa said, pushing her nose up.

Dylan stared at her slate, wondering if she should write something, or if she should spill her story to the royal family.

“Even if they are, you’re still just a kid yourself,” Prince Viggo said.

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

Dylan rubbed a piece of chalk between her fingers and considered her options. *Should I?*

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“*Children*!”

“Is something wrong, Miss Dylan?” Prince Callan asked as the two younger siblings glared at each other across the table.

Dylan smiled and rolled her shoulders back. *It’s not my secret to tell*, she decided. She adjusted her grip on her chalk before writing, *No. Thank you for breakfast—it was delicious!*

“Of course, dear. Come whenever you like. We are the only ones mad enough to be up at such an ungodly hour—excluding the servants,” King Rory said, brushing a crumb from his lap.

“Whoa, Nessa is right. You really did pack it away,” Viggo said, staring at the empty trays around Dylan’s plate.

“Viggo,” Callan frowned.

“Do you wanna see the palace? I could show you all the best spots,” Nessa said, latching a hand onto Dylan’s droopy sleeve.

Could you show me the kitchens? Dylan asked. Breakfast made her realize that it would be good to be able to find the kitchens so she wouldn’t have to starve in silence in the future.

“Of course! Cook will make hotcakes for you any time of the day if you just ask,” Nessa said, jumping in place.

“Take care not to wake any of the other guests,” King Rory said, standing reluctantly. “And Miss Dylan, please allow me to extend an invitation to you and your guardian for the marina opening tonight. It should be…amusing,” King Rory said.

Thank you for the invitation, Dylan wrote. She stood and picked up the pouch of chalk Princess Nessa had given her with the slate, pulling the strings so the little bag was tightly closed.

“You’re welcome. Nessa—no running!” King Rory called as the princess hurried across the room.

“Come on, Dylan. Viggo, Callan, are you coming with?”

“No,” Viggo answered. “I’m going to see if I can organize a horseback-riding event. Don’t bore our guest to death, Nessa. If you’ve seen one dusty castle, you’ve seen them all.” “Spoilsport. Callan?”

Callan checked a pocket watch that hung from his belt. “I have a little time. I would gladly escort you and Miss Dylan,” Callan said. When he stood up, he held his hand out again.

Again? Dylan thought, pushing her lips to one side. She turned to look at the breakfast table, hoping to find a roll she could give him.

Callan laughed—a rich sound that came from deep within him.

Prince Viggo and King Rory stopped at the door, looks of puzzlement on their faces.

“Are you alright, Callan?” King Rory asked as Dylan swiped two rolls, juggling the food, her slate, and her chalk.

“I’m fine,” Callan said after several extended moments of laughter. He drew his shoulders up and gave Dylan a refreshed smile. “I apologize, Miss Dylan,” he said before holding his arm out.

Dylan, sick of grappling to hold arms as if she were an invalid who needed assistance in walking, took her chalk pouch, hung it on Callan’s wrist, and walked off to the stairs. Somewhere behind her Callan made a choking noise, once again amused by her conduct.

Dylan paused by her “guards,” and pinched her lips together before offering them each a breakfast roll. *Even the idiot’s men shouldn’t be forced to endure hunger*.

Slowly, the two men reached out and took the offered food.

Dylan nodded in satisfaction and glided after Nessa. Callan was close behind her, and Bump and Lump trailed their trio like golems.

“This wing of the palace is mostly bedrooms ’n stuff.” Princess Nessa grabbed Dylan’s hand and held it. “It’s where we live, so it has our school rooms and playrooms, Da’s personal library, and our dining room for when we aren’t throwing parties. The main wing of the palace has the ballrooms, the big kitchens, the portrait gallery, the big library, and lots more.”

Dylan adjusted the princess’s grip on her hand and asked, *How does the food arrive so hot in your dining room, then?*

“There’s a smaller kitchen just off our dining room. The food is cooked there, but they shut the kitchen down when we aren’t eating private meals. No one will be there for the rest of the day,” Prince Callan said.

“So if you’re looking for a snack, it’s the main kitchen you want,” Princess Nessa said, romping down the hallway. “The main wing is the most fun.”

Why is that?

“The wing off the marina is so *boring*,” Princess Nessa complained.

“That wing is where most state affairs occur—during the summer, anyway,” Prince Callan explained. “The king and queen receive business visitors there; there are many meeting rooms and offices, and there are rooms filled with records. It’s not very exciting for an eight-year-old.”

“It’s not very exciting for *anyone*!”

Together, Prince Callan and Princess Nessa trooped Dylan from one end of the palace to the other. She began to think that Viggo might be right. The rooms began to blur after a while. The cathedral, with its stone architecture and colored-glass windows in the main wing of the castle, and

the portrait gallery, which held hundreds of portraits and paintings of Prince Callan and Princess Nessa's ancestors, however, were exceptions. She promised herself—if time and circumstances allowed—to revisit the gallery. Selkies had nothing like it.

They moved on to the practice grounds—there were two, one for guards and soldiers and another for nobility ("More so we don't get in the guards' way than for class separation," Prince Callan said)—were also interesting. It was fascinating to see the different weapons the Ringsted humans used and to watch the ways they fought.

The eldest prince and youngest princess also showed Dylan several ways to get down to the beach, so she wouldn't have to take the precarious stone stairs again.

By the time they finished the tour, it was noon, and Dylan's stomach was growling. The royal siblings showed Dylan the kitchens before hurrying off—Nessa for her afternoon lessons, and Prince Callan for a meeting.

Dylan made instant friends with the kitchen staff—who didn't even blink at the rough-looking Bump and Lump shadowing her. She carried on over the food they made and ate it with such obvious pleasure that all the cooks and kitchen maids told her to drop by whenever she was hungry.

So Dylan—her belly full after eating a large lunch of crab, mackerel, potatoes, and kale—snagged a roll and made her way back to her room, intending to see if Jarlath had recovered from the festival. She dropped by her room to re-arrange her dagger—it had poked her in the stomach all through meeting the kitchen servants—where she found an official invitation to the marina opening.

Dylan took the letter and her roll, skirted Bump and Lump—who had taken up their usual post outside her quarters—and trotted to Jarlath's room.

Jarlath sat in a chair, his skin a sickly green, with a cloth pressed over his eyes.

"What?" Jarlath said, his voice petulant.

Dylan delivered the invitation and ate her roll.

Jarlath peeled back his cloth and looked at the invitation. He groaned before putting his cloth back in place. "—nother ruddy party. No! I'm not going. I'm dying."

Dylan said nothing and finished her roll. He'd been so full of threats back in his "treasury," but the man was as fierce as a hermit crab. *Makes it better for me!*

"You can go if you want—but Oisin and Morri will be watching you. Stop chewing so loudly!"

Dylan dusted off her hand, reclaimed the invitation, and left—taking care to slam the door shut with such force it shook. She smiled in satisfaction when she heard Jarlath groan.

Bump was stone-faced as Dylan crossed the hallway with a smug smile, but Lump raised a bushy eyebrow. She paused for a moment to consider the big guard—the only talking one of the duo, the one that knew her name. He didn't react further, so she continued on to her room.

I'll go, Dylan decided. *Maybe someone will explain about the bandits.*

Chapter 6
The Wild Flower and the White Rose

When Dylan arrived at the marina opening, she realized almost immediately that her clothes were wrong. She wore the white shirt with the sleeveless red gown from her little travel satchel over it, but most of the ladies wore dresses that poofed around them like frosted cakes, made with brocade and lined with ribbon, lace, and trim. Their skirts were wide, their hair piled on their heads with gems and pearls threaded through their locks.

The men were more polished, as well. Most wore black or dark blue silk waistcoats with crisp white shirts, black trousers, and shiny riding boots. Some had a more military look with swallowtail jackets cut to complement their figures. Those men often had fancy trim and hats plumed with feathers.

A few nearby ladies glanced her way, disapproval souring their expressions.

It took Dylan all of two seconds to decide she didn't care before handing her invitation to a servant and bustling in. Bump and Lump stuck to the perimeter, letting Dylan forge her way into the heart of the festivities alone.

The marina was bigger than Dylan expected. It had a huge deck functioning as a courtyard. Most of the party goers gathered there, but people also lined the long piers that jutted out into the water.

Candlelit paper lamps were strung up and down every pier, a little like stars set against the black backdrop of the ocean.

The style of music and dancing was very different from what Dylan witnessed the day before. She was able to pick out a flute and several violins—but drums were completely absent, the music much more sedate. Instead of hopping and kicking, dancers glided in pairs. They had to be careful not to run into other couples due to the ladies' wide skirts.

No one clapped, nor were there any children playing in the crowds.

What odd customs. Dylan prowled the marina deck, hunting for food and drinks.

She found one small table with wedges of cheese cut for sampling. Dylan took a few but was unsatisfied. *There's more food here…I can smell it! Do the landers keep themselves trim by hiding it in odd locations?*

She tilted her head back to sniff the air when purple flower petals began falling next to her like raindrops.

Dylan turned to get a better look at the flowers, and only her selkie grace kept her from tripping over a bundle of purple cloth that appeared in front of her feet.

As she stared, the cloth unfolded, revealing a man clothed in a purple robe as he twisted up, almost as if he was growing out of the cloth. He had big, soulful brown eyes and a mop of curly brown hair—a roguish curl falling in his face. He was perhaps an inch taller than Dylan, the tallest human she'd encountered so far. His purple robe dripped with gold embroidery, and he wore a large, gaudy gold belt that had purple sapphires the length of Dylan's thumb encrusted in the center.

Dylan tilted her head at the new curiosity standing before her, and the man smiled. "The rare flower opens up for a rare beauty," he said in a deep, booming voice. He swept forward in an elaborate bow, and purple flower petals continued to fall.

Dylan paused for a moment before clapping and smiling, impressed with the stranger's entrance.

He looked up, a large smile budding. "Finally," he said. "Someone who appreciates my style and subtle beauty—ouch!" he said when a straw basket filled with petals whacked him in the head.

"Stay. And for land's sake, don't touch the young lady," a frosty female voice said.

Dylan turned around to see a young lady standing at the edge of the marina deck directly behind and above her. The lady's neat light brown hair was pulled back with a gold clasp. She wore a dress similar to the other ladies'—sleeved and made of patterned silk—but her dress did not poof and was a dark blue instead of the bold colors the other ladies favored.

She thrust her finger at Dylan and the stranger before hurrying away, following the deck railing to the stairs. She rejoined Dylan and the petal-coated man in moments.

"If you will pardon our intrusion, miss," the lady said, curtseying to Dylan.

“They call me Dooley of the wild flower, and this is my bosom friend, white rose Cagney,” the man said, brushing flower petals from his clothes.

The woman ground her teeth. “Please allow me to introduce us, miss. I regret to introduce you to Lord Dooley, the only son of Lord Bartley and Lady Grania of Silver Trees, owners of the White Sands Trading Company. I am Cagney, daughter of Gael and Cara from Glenglassera, and I serve as Lord Dooley’s assistant.”

It is my pleasure to meet you. I’m Dylan, Dylan wrote on her slate.

“Well met, Dylan,” Cagney said, curtseying a little. Though several inches shorter than Dylan, the young woman certainly seemed confident.

“When you give our names like that, it’s not any fun, Cagney. Try to make it poetic—say you are a woman of wandering and excitement,” the purple-robed man—Lord Dooley—said.

Cagney turned to stare at him, her blue eyes blistering.

“Or don’t,” Lord Dooley said as he fished a flower petal out of his hair. “Whatever you prefer.”

“I helped you with your *idiotic* entrance because it was the only way to get you to show your face here. I will not share in your shameless embellishments,” Cagney hissed before offering Dylan a pleasant smile. “You are the ward of Lord Jarlath of Kingsgrace Castle, yes?”

Please don’t hold it against me, Dylan wrote.

Lord Dooley chuckled at Dylan’s statement; Cagney blinked—astonished by Dylan’s frankness.

“It is our delight to meet you, Miss Dylan,” Lord Dooley said, making another sweeping bow. “If it would not bother you greatly, could Cagney and I escort such a beautiful, tender flower such as yourself through this harmonious gathering?”

Dylan gave Cagney a bemused smile. She found it funny that the young lord should describe her as a tender flower.

“He’s harmless, I assure you, though he often masquerades as a dunderhead,” Cagney said, getting a wide grin from Dylan.

“Pearl of my soul! Your words pierce my heart,” he said, clasping a giant hand to his chest.

You two are very well matched, Dylan observed via her slate.

“Thank you!” he preened.

Cagney’s expression seemed pained. “Would you like to see the rest of the refreshments?”

Dylan brightened. *Yes, please,* she wrote—mentally thanking Princess Nessa for her brilliant idea. It was so nice to be able to *communicate* again.

"This way, Miss Dylan," Cagney said. Dylan followed the smaller girl, and Lord Dooley swerved after them.

Tables of food were spread out on the upper deck, just past the musicians. There were salmon cakes, stuffed mushrooms, poached and pickled duck and chicken eggs, hazelnuts, trays of wild berries, prawns, soft breads, honey spreads, and roasted pig.

Dylan started with a sampling of everything—drawing grins from Lord Dooley.

"I love a woman with a good appetite," he crooned.

Cagney rolled her eyes and was about to say something when trumpets blew and drums beat in a thrumming pattern. Dylan leaned to see. The drummers were lined up by the marina entrance.

"The royal family—or most of it," Cagney said over the pounding drums. "King Rory, Queen Etain, Prince Callan, Princess Fianna, and Prince Viggo. Princess Nessa is too young to stay up this late."

Now, being able to see Prince Callan with his mother and eldest sister, Dylan could see that he and Princess Fianna had their mother's sand-colored hair—although Princess Fianna's was more blonde than Prince Callan's. Both Queen Etain and Princess Fianna wore dresses in the same poofy style as the rest of the women.

"Thank you, everyone, for attending the opening of the Royal Marina in the Summer Palace," King Rory's voice boomed. "Though we are aware the typhoons have cut off all trading with the northern countries of the continent, we believe it is important to foster trade among our people. We look forward to receiving many ships in this marina as our family spends the summer here," the king said. "With this party, we declare the Royal Marina open!"

Down on the beach, someone lit off fireworks, sending bursts of Ringsted saffron and emerald green into the air. Eventually blue, red, and purple fireworks boomed and colored the sky as well, drawing a big smile from Dylan.

She always loved human fireworks. Whenever possible, she watched—in her sea lion body—from the ocean. She remembered when the queen gave birth to Princess Nessa, and the capital shot off enough fireworks to light up the sky as if it were mid-afternoon.

“They’ll set off another round in a few minutes, once the king and queen complete a dance. Would you like to go down to a pier for a better viewpoint?” Cagney asked.

Which pier will have the best view? Dylan wrote.

“I’ll show you,” Cagney said, leading the way through the crowds and the servants bearing trays of food.

Sure enough, the young lady was right. Within a few minutes, another round of fireworks shot into the sky. Some were big and sweeping—like the branches of weeping willows. Others were small and curly, shrieking as they zoomed across the sky.

Dylan clapped in delight, although it seemed like most of the guests didn’t give the flashing lights a second glance. *Landers*, she thought with a tsk. *As dry as dust and half as interesting.*

“You’re such fun, Miss Dylan. I haven’t met anyone so eager to be pleased since I was a child.” Lord Dooley gave her a fond smile as Cagney led them on a tour of the marina.

It’s no surprise—no one here seems to eat enough to feed the fires of delight, Dylan wrote, getting a laugh out of the young lord.

“This is the long pier, used for deep sea vessels. Any of the smaller piers take them in too close to land. The ships would risk bottoming out on the rocks,” Cagney said.

Dylan peeked over the side of the pier, disheartened to see the water was out of her reach—she had been hoping to dip a hand in the ocean.

“Are you ready to return to the marina?” Dooley asked.

Dylan clutched her slate to her chest—dismayed with the thought of leaving so quickly. *How could you live in a palace by the sea and not want to frolic in it every moment?* Her shoulders drooped as she looked past Lord Dooley to the brightly lit marina and the glittering guests.

“You want to stay a moment longer?” he guessed.

Dylan brightened and wrote, *If you don’t mind.*

“Not at all,” he said with a big smile. “Take all the time you need.”

She gave the young lord a grateful look before she angled her body to face the ocean. *I wonder what the other selkies are doing*, she thought as Lord Dooley and Cagney strolled up the pier. *Are they searching for me, or are they chasing the sea witch? If Ringsted is in dire straits—as King Rory implied this morning—it seems that the sooner the witch is caught, the better. I really must find my pelt as soon as possible.*

“I see Cal is escorting Lady Aisling again tonight,” Dooley said to Cagney, his hands clasped behind his back.

Cagney—her back to Dylan—made a soft reply that Dylan couldn’t hear.

“That’s court speculation,” Lord Dooley said.

“If it is mere speculation, he should not pay such marked attention to her,” Cagney said.

“The man is your friend, Cagney. You are supposed to support him,” he said.

“Prince Callan is *your* close comrade. I would not presume to call myself his friend,” Cagney said.

Dylan wondered if she should give some sort of indication that she could hear them. She cleared her throat, scowling when she realized she made no noise.

“I will do it for you, then. It is true, Cal and I have known each other since we were small, but you must know he considers you a companion. Why, we were the only friends allowed to see him when he was on bed rest after he almost drowned. It’s been two years since then.”

“That is so,” Cagney acknowledged. “He has been…” the rest of Cagney’s words were lost to the shush of waves.

“Yes,” he agreed.

Dylan was starting to feel quite awkward being unwillingly privy to this very personal conversation, so she made a show of shuffling her feet.

The pair didn’t notice.

“Cal wasn’t grievously injured from the shipwreck,” Lord Dooley said.

“No,” Cagney agreed. “But he has…changed.

The shipwreck, again? Why does everyone place such importance on an event I barely remember—and I was the only one awake for it!

“He’s driven.”

“Is that what you call it?” she asked.

“You would label it as something else?”

“I don’t believe driven accurately describes the determination he has displayed in riding off to all parts of the country since his wreck. It’s almost as if he is searching for something.”

“Or someone,” he said. “He’s giving up, I think. Or he wouldn’t let his mother fawn over Lady Aisling like she does.”

Dylan decided to put herself out of her misery and loudly approached the pair. *I'm willing to sacrifice time with the ocean if it means ending this. There's something dirty about listening in when the other party is unaware of you.*

"All finished, Miss Dylan?" Lord Dooley asked, his purple robe snapping in the breeze.

Dylan nodded, feeling defeated even though no battle had taken place.

The trio turned to go back up the deserted pier and almost ran into Prince Callan.

"I thought I might catch you out here," Prince Callan said, a smile accenting his words. "Though it is a party on the marina, almost no one walks the piers."

"Good evening, Your Highness," Cagney said, dipping in a curtsey. "I thought Miss Dylan might be interested in the various purposes the piers serve."

After several moments, Dylan also remembered to curtsey, slightly lifting the skirts of her plain dress.

"Good evening Cagney, Dooley, Miss Dylan. Are you enjoying the party?" Prince Callan asked, settling his glittering gaze on Dylan.

The food is mouth-watering. And the company is wonderful, she wrote.

"It would be difficult to find more entertaining guides than Dooley and Cagney," Prince Callan said, clasping Dooley's hands with great familiarity.

"Miss Dylan is a fine companion in her own right," Dooley said to the prince before turning to Dylan. "It was Callan who suggested you may be interested in our company tonight. He mentioned you are a great dancer; I thought I might seek you out for the joy of your company and a companionable dance, if you find the idea likeable."

Dylan smiled and nodded, still feeling a little awkward over the personal conversation she had unwillingly listened in on. *I would like to try this strange new kind of dance they are performing tonight. But first, I will need more food*, she wrote.

"Excellent," Cagney said.

"You're happy to be rid of him?" Prince Callan guessed.

"Yes. I wish to speak to Lady Cayleen of Fowl Feather Merchants & Sons & Daughter—and she won't brave my company as long as Dooley is dressed as he is," Cagney said.

“I cannot help it if the lords and ladies of Ringsted fail to appreciate my superior sense of fashion and color,” Dooley declared.

“I would make my last stand on a different hilltop if I were you, my friend,” Prince Callan said, giving the young lord a friendly slap on the back. He then offered Dylan and Cagney a smile. “If I may also appeal to both of you, Miss Dylan and Cagney, for a dance,” Prince Callan said.

“Certainly, Your Highness, though I must voice my doubts that you will have the time,” Cagney said.

Prince Callan’s smile went lopsided. “Perhaps,” he said. He opened his mouth to speak further, when the blonde girl from the day before swept up to them, wrapping her hands around Prince Callan’s arm.

“Callan, they’re going to play another Loire dance. I insist you be my partner,” the girl said—Lady Aisling if Dylan remembered correctly. Lady Aisling’s sunshine blonde hair was piled on the top of her head with a few curls dripping over her shoulder. Pearl pins held her hair in place, and she wore a crimson dress trimmed with black lace. “Oh, pardon me, Lord Dooley, Cagney, miss,” she said. Her eyes lingered on Dylan’s dress and one of her eyebrows popped up, but she said nothing.

“Lady Aisling, how pleasant you look,” Dooley said, giving her a sweeping bow.

“Thank you, my lord. Will you excuse me if I pull Callan from you?” she asked.

“Of course, my lady,” Dooley said as he and Cagney exchanged cryptic looks.

Prince Callan smiled at the beautiful blonde, then nodded to the trio. “I’ll try to drop by later. Good evening.” He strolled up the pier, his arm extended for Lady Aisling to hold.

It occurred to Dylan that although the prince smiled most of the time, the gesture never seemed to reach his eyes. That was not to say his eyes were dark or suspicious; it was merely that he seemed to wear his smile the way a lady styled her hair. It was part of his costume—maybe part of his armor. *Why does he do all these things if they bring him no joy?* Dylan wondered. *I imagine it is an imbalance of humors. It’s a wonder humans aren’t all grouches. They cannot play in the ocean and experience true freedom,* she thought. *Instead, they fret about bandits and typhoons—without explaining what they are worried about, might I add.*

Dylan's stomach growled. Cagney kept her eyes fastened on the retreating couple, but Dooley turned to grin at Dylan.

"Ready for round two of refreshments, I take it?" he asked.

Dylan nodded enthusiastically and wrote, *Always!*

"Then please allow me to escort the most beautiful ladies present to the refreshments," Dooley said, holding out both of his arms.

Dylan sighed in longsuffering and placed a hand on his arm—adjusting her grasp several times to find the least awkward position. Cagney stared at Dooley's arm like it was a snake.

"Jewel of my soul, am I that disgraceful to you?" he asked, batting his eyes at her.

Cagney gave him a sour look before she took his arm. "Every year, I swear you lose a little of the bit of intelligence you've managed to hold onto," Cagney grumbled.

Dylan looked at the way Cagney held Dooley's arm and adjusted her own grasp.

"Cagney, my heart. You wound me!"

"You are not a butterfly, my lord. I suggest you stiffen up."

"Only if you stand with me, my heart. And you don't—not nearly enough, anyway," Dooley said with a dramatized sniff.

Cagney ground her teeth, and Dylan silently laughed, thoroughly diverted by her self-appointed guides.

Although the party didn't end until the wee hours of the morning, Prince Callan and Lord Dooley were up shortly after dawn, practicing swordsmanship on the balcony of the prince's room. It was the perfect width and length to hold practice matches, and it afforded them a beautiful view of the ocean. And, in this case, the bronze-skinned and dark-haired beauty that stood on the beach, knee deep in water.

"I'm telling you, Dooley. It's her," Callan said, pointing at Miss Dylan's back with his practice rapier.

"My prince. Cagney would tell you that I am the most poetic, foggy-brained, romantic sop in all of Ringsted, but even I have a hard time believing you can recognize her," Dooley said, wiping a sheen of sweat

from his forehead. “You were half-drowned, and it was the middle of the night.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m positive she was the girl who dragged me onto shore. She isn’t the kind of person you would forget,” Prince Callan said, tilting his head as he watched the young lady splash in the ocean—getting her dress soaked.

“I will give you that,” Dooley grunted. “That ocean flower is… distinctive. She is impressively tall. Perhaps even a touch taller than you.”

Callan didn’t reply. Instead, he watched Miss Dylan as she plunged neck deep into the ocean for a swim.

“Are you certain she is your shipwreck-savior? You don’t even remember being pulled from the ruin of your boat, and I thought it was her singing voice that haunted you. In case you’ve forgotten, Miss Dylan can’t speak,” Dooley said, moving into position at one end of the balcony.

“Maybe not now,” Callan admitted also taking sparring stance. “But that doesn’t mean she didn’t two years ago,” he said.

“If you insist it is she, I shall endeavor to believe you,” Dooley said. They crossed swords.

The young men fell silent as they moved forwards and backwards, parrying, lunging, and landing counterstrikes.

Dooley was the better dueler, but Callan had more stamina, and it showed as Dooley barely lodged the winning blow at Callan’s chest in time to keep Callan from his own winning strike.

“She has an aura of mystery—though I must confess I enjoy her frankness. Cagney’s jaw almost fell off several times last night,” Dooley chuckled before he groaned and stretched his arms above his head. “Can we be done? I wish to return to Cagney’s gentle ministrations.”

Callan snorted. “We can be done fighting, but I’m still anxious to hear your thoughts about Miss Dylan.”

“What more is there to say? I will not argue with you, considering the months you’ve pondered over her and searched for her like a scent hound. You could do worse based on my observations last night. I mean, Cagney likes her. And Cagney only likes merchants,” Dooley said, flopping to the ground and placing his towel over his head.

“That’s just the thing. Miss Dylan seems to be good and honorable—and she is truly delightful—but she’s *Jarlath’s* ward,” Callan said, cleaning his practice rapier with practiced and efficient motions.

“Ahhhh.”

“Ahhhh, indeed,” Callan frowned, taking a cloth to his sword. “I want her to be innocent and oblivious of Jarlath’s ways. She is…” he trailed off, unable to put the upheaval his heart was going through into words. She was unknown, and his position required discernment. Too much was at stake. “I need better control,” Callan said, his frown sharpening into a scowl.

“Well, she can’t have been his ward when you were shipwrecked. That was near Glenglassera, and Jarlath lives on the opposite side of Ringsted.”

“Correct,” Callan’s frown deepened.

“And that worries you even more?” Dooley guessed.

Callan polished his rapier for a few more moments before he nodded. “She may be a part of his scheme.”

“Have you received any intelligence about whatever scam he’s running?” Dooley asked.

“No. My best agents are still stranded outside of Ringsted thanks to these blasted storms. I should have called some of them in before winter, but I wanted to learn more about Erlauf and Loire’s new princesses.”

“That will teach you for being nosey,” Dooley said, picking his towel off his face to show a good natured, sunny grin. After a few moments, his smile dimmed. “Although I feel your pain. Some of White Sands’ best men are stranded outside of Ringsted, too. Cagney and my parents are struggling to find a way to communicate with them. But can’t any of your spies and agents here in Ringsted find information on Jarlath’s activities? You *know* he’s up to something—he has to be connected with the bandits somehow.”

“But to what end? And how did he get such a ring of thievery in place? He can’t have known the storms would worsen and cut us off,” Callan said, putting his practice rapier in its stand just inside the room.

“What I’m curious to know is how did he find enough men to play the part of brigand? Our Ringsted sailors are struggling, but I’m certain only a few of them have taken up thievery to supplement their income,” Dooley said.

“With so many unanswered questions, I find it hard to believe Miss Dylan’s arrival is a coincidence,” Callan said, leaning against the doorframe.

“That’s what’s bothering you,” Dooley declared. “You are worried Dylan is his ally in all of this.”

“She is his ward.”

“You said that already. I take it you assume that means she’s not trustworthy,” Dooley said.

Callan shrugged.

“Then give her a chance. Observe her and judge for yourself. I don’t think that girl has it in her. She doesn’t mask herself as you do. She’s more like me; she is neither a part of nor a victim of court antics and games,” Dooley said. “I suspect she is not with Jarlath by choice.”

Callan’s watched the mysterious girl as her mountain-men guards fished her out of the ocean. “I can’t make a decision based on my gut. I’m a prince. If she’s under Jarlath, I cannot risk that she will spy on his behalf. I must make myself simply observe her—for the sake of my country.”

“Whatever makes you happy. As I mentioned before, Cagney likes her, so I am inclined to allow her into our company,” Dooley grunted.

As if she was being summoned, Cagney threw open the door of the prince’s sitting room.

“Lord Dooley!” she said, her voice shrill when she spotted the big lord splayed out on the stone balcony like a drunkard. “You have a breakfast meeting at the next bell! You cannot attend it looking like a sweaty pig!”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I guess you’ll have to go in my place, jewel of my soul,” Dooley said, blinking his mournful eyes.

Cagney’s eyes narrowed with rage.

“Both of you are coming to Mother’s dinner tonight, yes?” Callan asked.

“Your Highness, I apologize for my poor manners. Yes, we will be in attendance,” Cagney said. She moved to curtsey, but Callan waved her off.

“Do you want us to keep an eye on your budding ocean flower?” Dooley asked as he peeled himself off the cool balcony.

“If you wouldn’t mind. I look forward to seeing you then,” Callan said.

“As do we, Your Highness. Thank you. Now, if you would excuse us,” Cagney said.

“Of course. Enjoy your breakfast meeting,” Callan said.

Cagney gave Dooley an acidic look before striding from the room.

Dooley winced. “I had best go after her. If I don’t hurry, she’ll have me clothed in something halfway decent.”

“Good luck,” Callan said.

“Thank you, I shall need it. Until tonight?”

“Until tonight.”

Dylan’s dress and shoes made squishing sounds as she walked down the palace hall, still damp from her morning swim. She would have stayed out longer, but Lump—the “talker” of her two guards—ordered her “Inside” in a deep and forbidding voice.

Plus, Dylan’s stomach was rumbling, and if she wanted to visit the kitchens, she needed to be dressed in a dry gown.

Dylan squooshed her way down the hallway, pausing just outside of Jarlath’s room to stare at his door with a heavy heart.

The selkies weren’t moving up the coast—probably because of all the human activity at the Summer Palace. It was only natural. They had no reason to think she would be in the Summer Palace, and they would never risk accidentally revealing themselves with so many humans around. She would have to retrieve her pelt and face Jarlath and the sea witch alone. But she still didn’t understand how Jarlath was benefiting from the partnership with the sea witch.

First order of business, I must search for my pelt. Then, I must discover his secrets. Nothing like the present. She found his door unlocked, so she threw it open.

Jarlath, having recovered from the festival, was up. He was fussing with his black waistcoat in front of a mirror. “Where have you—ew. You smell like a fish,” Jarlath said, wrinkling his nose. “Send your dress to be cleaned—we’ve been invited to tonight’s royal dinner and ball—the first of the season. You can’t go looking like a fisherman’s daughter.”

Dylan was not much impressed with Jarlath’s proclamation. She ignored him and peered around his room, taking inventory of possible hiding places.

Jarlath scowled at his reflection. “The green coat looks better,” he decided, removing his waistcoat and grabbing a different jacket. Based on the clothes strewn across his bed, he had been at this for some time.

When Dylan eyed his almost empty armoire, Jarlath realized she was still there. “I told you ’bout the invitation. Now scat! Go scrub yourself down until you don’t reek of sea water,” Jarlath said.

I’ll have to come back when he’s gone. Dylan found it disappointing that the ruddy-faced lord no longer had a massive headache when she kicked his door shut.

She meandered across the hall to her own rooms. She was about to duck inside when Lump cleared his throat.

Dylan turned to look at her guards.

Bump exhaled a grunt and flipped a dagger in the air with the grace and confidence.

“Oisin says he’ll find a maid to bring you warm water,” Lump said in deep, baritone voice. “I’ll stay here. After you’re clean, gimme your dress. I’ll send it out to be cleaned.”

*He’s very different—*they’re *very different—from Jarlath and the rest of his men,* Dylan thought. She nodded to show she understood before slipping into her room. *But they are still Jarlath’s toads. I do* not *smell. But…I will not put my pelt in danger over such a trifle. Tonight, I will wear my yellow gown. Again.*

Chapter 7
Parties and Portraits

When the time for the party came, Dylan's saffron dress was still a little damp, but she put it on anyway—even she knew enough not to wear her red gown two nights in a row. Jarlath stayed in his room all afternoon, and he made Dylan go with him to find his friends. *Thwarted again.*

"Tonight will be tricky for you, little fish. You need to stay with me for a bit, but if I start talking with a gal, you best take yourself elsewhere. Wouldn't do any good for them to think I'm with *you*," Jarlath instructed as they walked the perimeter of the brightly lit ballroom.

Dylan ignored him, disappointed to see that the ball was pretty much a repeat of the marina opening. The attendees wore fancier clothing, the music was slower, and the dancing gliding, polished movements. Nothing seemed different—except the grand location, and Dylan felt there probably wouldn't be any fireworks given the indoor setting.

"Lord Jarlath, I didn't know you were here. I didn't see you at the marina opening last night," an older man said.

"I was sick," Jarlath said.

"Ah, how unfortunate. But I do recall your companion. She's very… eye-catching," the man said, studying Dylan from head to toe.

"She's exotic alright," Jarlath said with a grin.

"Father, did you see Lady Darra? Her dress is *hideous*—oh, hello, Jarlath," a petite young lady with orange-red hair said. "I haven't seen you around in a while." She glanced at Dylan.

Dylan took the opportunity to remove her hand from Jarlath's arm.

"Ah, Lady Kellah, I was about to introduce my *ward* to your father," Jarlath said. Behind his back he flapped his hand, motioning Dylan to leave.

What if he talks to his sardine friend and red-faced friend? They might be in on his plan with the sea witch. His company is as welcome as a sea slug's, but I still haven't figured out how he's profiting from this! Dylan stood her ground with no enthusiasm.

"Oh?" Lady Kellah said, her voice dubious.

“Indeed. I am caring for her while—” Jarlath said before launching into an elaborate lie about Dylan’s arrival into his life.

Dylan tapped her foot and watched Jarlath try to flirt with Lady Kellah. Jarlath was eager to get rid of her—he tried to discreetly kick at her, but Dylan just backed away a few paces.

When Jarlath waxed poetic for five minutes about Lady Kellah’s beauty, Dylan feared she might soon expire out of boredom.

Does he have no sense of responsibility? Why is he not seeking out his comrades? I am much ashamed I was caught by him, Dylan thought, looking out at the crowd in her boredom. On the opposite side of the room, a flash of bright green caught her eye. A tall man who looked like a long strand of seaweed in his lush green waistcoat and trousers stood next to a young lady wearing a subdued, plum-colored gown.

Lord Dooley and Cagney, Dylan thought. She glanced at Jarlath and wallowed in a moment of indecision. *I need to hunt out his plans, but this is so boring.*

Across the room, Dooley said something, and Cagney cracked him in the face with her lace fan.

That’s it. I can always come back and follow Jarlath around when he’s done embarrassing himself. She walked in the direction of the young lord and his assistant.

When Dylan drew close enough to the pair, she saw that Lord Dooley had gone the extra distance to make his outfit hideous and had procured boots in the same string-bean-green color as his clothes. His eyes lit up when Dylan reached them. “Miss Dylan—I thought you might attend tonight’s fun. How are you?”

I am well. You two? Dylan wrote.

“We are fantastic. I love parties—although Cagney ruined my entrance on this one.” Dooley frowned.

“Being hauled into the party in a cart would not make you look noble, it would make you look like a foolish drunk who can’t keep his own feet under him,” Cagney frowned. “And at this early an hour.”

“That’s Cagney for you,” Dooley said. “She wants to make sure I look like a proper drunk and not a lightweight.”

“I said nothing of the sort,” Cagney snapped.

“But you did, my heart. You see straight into my soul,” Dooley said, taking Cagney’s hands and patting them.

Cagney ripped her hands out of Dooley's grip and gave him a withering glare before she turned to Dylan. "Is your guardian with you tonight?"

Dylan nodded.

"Would you like to eat with us? Jarlath does not strike me as the most attentive of guardians; he may forget you in the excitement," Cagney offered.

I HOPE he forgets me, Dylan wrote with disgust.

"So you will break your bread with us?" Dooley asked with a kind smile. One of his brown curls hung in his face, accenting his handsome features.

Do they only serve bread at parties like this? Dylan wrote, thinking she should have grabbed a snack at the kitchen before coming.

"No," Dooley laughed. "It's a full-course, sit-down dinner. I'll go see someone about having you placed with us. It would be my pleasure to escort the two most beautiful ladies in the room to dinner," Dooley said, dodging the blow Cagney meant to give him. "I will be but a moment, ladies—though my heart will pine for you, Cag—ow." Dooley moved too slowly, so Cagney was able to smack his shoulder with her fan.

"Idiot," Cagney muttered as the tall nobleman moved off. "A cow has more sense."

He's funny, Dylan wrote.

"Do not tell him you think so—I beg of you! It will encourage him," Cagney said, twisting her lace fan.

As you wish. Is there any food out, or do we have to wait until dinner?

Cagney read Dylan's question before she shook her head. "There are some refreshments already available. This way, I believe."

Dylan followed Cagney to a table of food. The snacks were not as plentiful as they had been the previous night, but Dylan was happy to have any at all. She had just taken a little plate and put a sampling of a few sausages on it, when someone said her name.

"Miss Dylan, is it? Not even any parents to cite—how pitiable."

Dylan turned around to face Lady Kellah, the woman Jarlath had greeted—apparently it hadn't turned out quite how he was hoping—and several other ladies.

Cagney shifted uneasily and looked back and forth between Dylan and Lady Kellah.

Dylan knew she was being baited, but the sausage was more interesting. She took a bite. *What is this? Pork? Is there such a thing as chicken sausage?*

"She looks pitiable," one of the other ladies said, flicking a fan open. "Did you buy a peasant girl's best dress?"

"Lady Darra, that's unkind," another said. "I imagine it would be most difficult to find enough cloth to fit such a tall, not to mention muscular frame."

No, not pork. It tastes funny. Dylan thought. She saw a tray of honey glazed rolls. She picked one up, put it on a plate, and handed it to Cagney.

Cagney blinked but accepted the plate.

"And you cannot talk? Is that out of sheer horror, or is it a ploy to get attention?" Lady Kellah asked.

My, my. These girls lack imagination. Dylan ate another piece of sausage. *What are they trying to accomplish? Are their minds so small they believe there is merit in being known as a harpy?*

"Excuse me, Lady Kellah, but don't you have better ways to spend your time?" Cagney asked.

Lady Kellah laughed. "You're trying to defend her? Oh, Cagney, I would have thought you learned your lesson by now. Just because you hover in Lord Dooley's shadow doesn't make you one of us."

"No matter how long you cling to the young lord, his wealth and power will not rub off on you, commoner," another lady spat.

"Everyone knows you're his assistant because his parents pity you," Lady Darra said.

Dylan stopped eating when she realized Cagney was shrinking in her spot. The young, confident girl took a step back under the verbal onslaught, her chin dipping.

Their words hurt her, Dylan realized.

"And when Lord Dooley settles down with a *proper* lady, you'll be pushed to the back—forced to mind a market stall in a backwater city for the White Sands Trading Company. Just like your parents," Lady Kellah said. "You—yeeek!" she shrieked when Dylan wiped her fingers coated in sausage oils on her dress.

Dylan waited until the enraged lady looked up at her before mouthing "oops" and covering her lips with a hand.

“You clumsy oaf!” Lady Kellah shouted. “Look what you did to my dress!”

Dylan batted her eyelashes at the lady before gesturing wide. Everyone in the area had stopped speaking and dancing to stare at the group.

Lady Kellah’s face burned red with shame and humiliation.

Dylan smiled and made a shooing motion.

Lady Kellah gripped her skirts. “Your thuggish attack proves my point—you are a brute.” She turned on her heels and marched off.

“Why did you do that?” Cagney asked.

Because they remind me of seagulls, and I didn’t want them flapping around us all night. That would significantly raise our chances of getting pooped on, Dylan wrote.

“*Dylan*,” Cagney hissed.

You wanted to know.

“They’re going to come after you again, now. If you just stood there and took it, they would have left us alone, eventually.”

Watching fools entertains me only for a few minutes. Eat your roll, Dylan ordered, trying to distract Cagney. She had a feeling the meticulous girl would not be pleased to know Dylan intervened because of her.

Cagney frowned but did as she was told. “This is my favorite appetizer,” she admitted.

I know, Dylan wrote. She searched the room for Lord Dooley. She had taken note of the young lady’s preferences the previous night.

“They’re just jealous, probably. I mean, some of them are naturally mean-spirited, but just about everyone in the palace heard about Prince Callan and Princess Nessa showing you around yesterday,” Cagney said.

I see Dooley, Dylan wrote.

Cagney stood on her tip toes to see the tall family coming their way. “Oh, he’s with his parents: Lord Bartley and Lady Grania.”

“There you are—gem of my soul! Mother, Father, this is the Miss Dylan I was talking about,” Dooley said, brushing off the sleeve of his bright green coat.

“Good to meet you, Miss Dylan,” Lord Bartley said.

“Yes,” Lady Grania added.

Both the lord and lady looked mild-mannered and…not plain, but *average*. Dylan, however, didn’t trust their blandness. They seemed to

wear it the way angel sharks bury themselves in sand as camouflage when they settled on the ocean floor and waited for prey.

"Cagney, both Bartley and I were impressed you were able to drag Dooley to a second function so soon," Lady Grania said.

"Third—this is the third function I have attended in the past three days," Dooley proudly said, puffing his chest.

Cagney pressed her lips together. "It is expected that you would attend *all* the opening events of the Summer Palace. It's good business."

"It's boring," Dooley said.

"Which is why we renew our compliments," Lady Grania said.

"The reports you sent regarding the store in Mulkeer were genius. Could we implore you to take a similar look at our stand in Easky?" Lord Bartley asked.

"Certainly, although I feel you overestimate the intelligence of my observations," Cagney said.

"Would you care to dance with me, Miss Dylan? They will be at this for hours," Dooley said.

Dylan nodded, excited about the idea. Even if the more formal dances weren't as fun, Dylan still adored dancing.

Dooley offered his arm, and Dylan reluctantly took it. Dooley, to her surprise, led Dylan to an outdoor patio instead of the dance floor.

"Forgive me for my misleading invitation, but I wanted to speak to you, and you would not be able to respond whilst we danced," Dooley smiled.

She nodded, waiting.

"Those girls who were speaking to you, were they insulting Cagney?" Dooley asked.

Dylan blinked, a little surprised by the question. *Yes.*

Dooley nodded once. "How did she take it?"

Badly.

Dooley rubbed his forehead and said nothing.

They're harpies, Dylan added.

Dooley cracked a smile. "You are a strong individual."

Thank you.

"Unfortunately, the gem of my heart isn't quite so tough. I prize her soft heart, but I ache for her when someone says unkind things."

Dylan had nothing to say to that, but studied the young lord carefully. She had seen some men look at her older sisters the way Dooley stared into the ballroom just then—probably looking at Cagney.

"Cagney is very important to me."

I have noticed.

Lord Dooley watched Dylan, a pleasant smile playing on his lips. "I think we're going to be great friends. Thank you for your insight. Now, may I have this dance?"

Dylan let the tall man lead her onto the dance floor. They slipped into a faster-paced dance that Cagney had explained the previous night was from a place called Erlauf. It involved whirling around one's partner and clapping in a steady beat. The longer the dance went, the faster the dancers whirled, ducking under each other's arms and popping upright. Dylan felt exhilarated.

When the dance finished, Dooley was puffing. The pair returned to Cagney, who stood with Prince Callan.

That was fun, Dylan wrote.

"You have admirable stamina, flower of beauty," Dooley wheezed.

"Forgive me for not mentioning this before, but when I first danced with you at the festival, you struck me as a remarkably beautiful dancer, Miss Dylan. It is enjoyable to watch you dance," Prince Callan. His smile was warm, and there was something in his eyes. Not the false joy he often wore but…hope.

Dylan tucked the observation away to ponder later and wrote, *I've been terrible. I don't know any of the dances I've seen the past few days. It is fun, but I don't think I pay the dance any compliments.*

Cagney shook her head. "You are easily the most graceful of all, Miss Dylan. It is not often one sees such a dancer. You are beautiful."

Dylan pursed her lips.

"Accept the compliment, pearl of the ocean, or I will for you. It is blasted hard to keep up with you," Dooley gasped, fanning his face.

Thank you, Dylan reluctantly wrote. *My sisters are much better dancers than I*, she added.

"You have sisters?" Prince Callan asked.

Five—I am the youngest.

"Five?" Lord Dooley said before breaking off in a sharp whistle. "Your father is a brave man."

“Callan? Dinner is about to be served. We should lead the way to the dining hall,” Lady Aisling said, appearing behind Callan.

Dooley and Cagney looked at each other. Cagney raised her eyebrows, and Dooley held out a hand in a supplicating gesture.

“I suppose you are right, although I am escorting my sister tonight,” Prince Callan said, wearing his ever-present smile.

“So Viggo told me, but he said he would walk her to her place. Are you ready?” Lady Aisling said, tucking her hand in the crook of Callan’s elbow.

“Yes.” Prince Callan turned to Dooley, Cagney, and Dylan. “I will see the three of you after dinner.”

“Enjoy,” Dooley said, waggling his fingers at the departing prince.

“That is Lady Aisling,” Cagney said.

I remember from last night, Dylan wrote before craning her neck to see over the sea of heads. Where was Jarlath? Who was he sitting with, and how could she use that information against him?

“It has been speculated that Prince Callan will marry her,” Dooley said, a wry smile budding on his lips. “Because of her beauty and *sweet* temperament. She is the daughter of Lord Eirnin and Lady Oona of Green Harbor.”

Someone important? Dylan wrote, half paying attention. Where *was* Jarlath?

“No, which is the reason Callan would marry her,” Cagney said. “If a Ringsted royal were to marry someone from an influential family, there would be economic repercussions. It is likely that other countries would favor it as a way of cozying up to the Ringsted crown.”

“What Cagney means is that to keep everyone’s chances equal, for the past century or two, the Ringsted royal family only marries mid-ranked nobility,” Dooley said.

Cagney frowned. “That’s what I just said.”

“You used a lot of big words,” Dooley said. Cagney scowled, but the young lord smiled and held out both of his arms when a bell rang. “There’s the dinner bell. Finally, time to eat,” Dooley said, patting his stomach.

“You made the arrangements for Dylan to sit with us?” Cagney asked, just as Dylan caught sight of Jarlath’s stocky frame. He was not—as Dylan had feared—with any fellow noblemen, but was instead escorting a busty brunette in the direction of the dining room.

He'll be occupied, Dylan thought. *And not with his plans with the sea witch. I wonder…*Dylan thought. She looked around. Bump and Lump were posted by the ballroom entrance. They weren't watching her or Jarlath. They stood by the wall looking bored.

Yes. This just might work, Dylan thought, a smile budding on her lips.

"May I escort the two of you beautiful flowers of—Dylan?" Dooley blinked when she broke away from them.

Dylan waved to her new friends before she ran to the patio Dooley had taken her to before—anxious to get out of sight before the ballroom cleared and she was open to Bump and Lump's scrutiny.

While all of the attendees trickled into the dining room, Dylan heaved herself over the patio railing and dropped to the gardens. She bunched up her skirts and ran, sprinting across the moonlight-dappled lawn. She ran the perimeter of the main castle wing—the music from the ball a faint whisper in the air.

Dylan's footfalls were muted as she ran on the cobblestone bridge, heading for the castle wing that overlooked the beach, the wing that held her room—and Jarlath's. She darted into the castle and ghosted up the hallways, stopping just before she reached her hallway. She peeked around the corner, but no one was there. She held her sides—which ached from her run—and her secret but secured dagger as she meandered up the hallway.

She tried the door to Jarlath's room; it was locked.

No! *King Murron's crest—why can't something go smoothly for once? Jarlath is a dope, but he has the luck of a mage!* Dylan thought before she kicked the door in her anger. That hurt her foot, and it didn't help at all. *Over-cautious sea slug—offspring of a sea cucumber!* she raged, jumping in place in frustration. After a few moments, she scowled. *It is not at all gratifying to rage inside one's head.* She heaved her shoulders back. *To the outside!*

Dylan navigated her way to the pathway that wound snug against the inside of the sea wall. The path did not veer close to the castle, but if she stood on her tip toes and angled herself right, she could see in the windows…if the curtains weren't drawn. Dylan circled the perimeter of castle, looking in windows for about fifteen minutes when she realized that Jarlath's room *didn't* have a window.

She returned to Jarlath's room, slipped her smuggled dagger out of her gown, and tried prying the door open. It didn't budge. She tried shoving the tip of her dagger in the lock and wriggling it around, hoping to spring it. Nothing happened.

She spent over an hour attempting to force the door open, but nothing worked. Defeated, she walked back up to the main wing of the Summer Palace, her feet dragging as she gazed up at the silver moon. She was wandering through the gardens just outside the ballroom when she heard, "Miss Dylan?"

Dylan turned to see Princess Nessa walking hand-in-hand with an older woman.

"I *thought* it was you. Why aren't you at the ball? Don't you think it's fun? They just finished dinner, and they had cream cakes—my favorite. Nurse let me peek in and watch for a few minutes. Miss Dylan, what's wrong?"

Dylan moved to stand under a flickering torch so she could write, *I left something in my room, but I have somehow locked myself out of my quarters*, she wrote.

"Oh, that's not so bad. You would be surprised how often that happens. Just go to the kitchens or tell a servant. They'll have someone run to the chamberlain's office and get a spare key for you," Princess Nessa said.

Dylan brightened. *Really?*

"Yep!"

"Princess," the older woman said.

Princess Nessa sighed, the picture of sadness. "I must take myself off to bed, now. Life is so desolate. Enjoy the party, Dylan. Miss Dylan," the princess said, correcting herself.

Dylan curtseyed and waited until the princess and her nurse left the garden and wound around the corner of the castle before she scurried over to the overhanging patio.

I might not have broken into Jarlath's room, but I got some information for my troubles, Dylan thought as she tied her skirts up. She scaled the jutting rocks of the castle—it was easier than the cliff climbing as she and her cousins used to do—until she could grab the railing and drag herself onto the patio.

She righted herself and brushed off her dress, peering in through the windows. Couples were filing from the dining room. Dylan would have to

stop by the kitchen later.

The information is worth the price, she decided, waiting for a group of girls to scurry past the patio doors before she ducked inside. *I hope*, she thought as her stomach growled.

Dylan ate a spoonful of oatmeal and tilted her head as she studied a painting of a woman holding a skinny, hairless animal. *Is that a dog or a rat? Landers keep the oddest pets*, she thought as she moved to the next painting.

After suffering through the rest of the party on an empty stomach, she had retired early, hoping to cut her losses and rise for an early breakfast. Instead, her big, lonely bed reminded her that she was far from her home, family, and her sisters. It had been hard to sleep without Muriel's gentle snores slapping the room like hushed waves, or without Murphy's occasional twitches jostling their straw-stuffed mattresses.

So Dylan reluctantly rose in the dark—elated when she realized Bump and Lump were nowhere to be seen (they were probably sleeping) and searched out the kitchens where—as Princess Nessa had promised—servants were awake and stoking the flames. The head cook for the hour graciously gave her a nice serving of oatmeal sweetened with honey and sprinkled with ground nuts.

Not quite willing to try sleeping yet, Dylan had carried her food to the portrait gallery—perhaps the most fascinating hall in all of the palace wings to the sea princess. Selkies were expert dancers, and their singing skills were unmatched. But art? Art eluded them with an embarrassing persistence.

Not one selkie could paint like this—and the landers' chosen subjects are strange and oddly mesmerizing. Dylan leaned in to look at a painting of a young, muscular man chasing two girls through a garden.

Dylan plopped down on a bench in front of a bed-sized painting of a city. The city was built on an inlet—although the ocean was still visible—and curled around a massive harbor. *I bet whatever city this is isn't so prosperous now. If one goes by King Rory's words, all trading has stopped because of the storms.* Dylan stuffed another spoonful of delicious oatmeal in her mouth. *What does Jarlath get from empty harbors?*

“That’s Glenglassera, Ringsted’s capital.”

Dylan jumped, almost losing her grip on her oatmeal. She turned, a little annoyed with herself at failing to hear Prince Callan enter the portrait gallery.

“Good evening, Miss Dylan. I must admit I am surprised to find you up at this hour. What brings you here?” Prince Callan asked. He wore the gracious smile that didn’t touch his eyes and bowed.

Dylan set her snack on her lap and untied her slate from the skirt of her gown. *Oatmeal*, she wrote before gesturing to her snack.

Prince Callan furrowed his brow. “In a bucket?”

Dylan curled a protective arm around the wooden water pail she had poured her oatmeal into. *The cook said I could have as much as I wanted.*

Prince Callan laughed. “Indeed, you were correctly informed. I apologize for my manners. It is merely—that is a lot of oatmeal.”

I’m hungry.

“So I see,” Prince Callan said. He glanced at the painting of Glenglassera and drew closer to Dylan’s bench. “I imagine you would be hungry. You missed a splendid dinner,” he said, watching her from the corner of his eye.

She swallowed a wad of oatmeal before writing, *So Dooley told me.*

“May I inquire what kept you away?”

I forgot something in my room.

“And it took you all of dinner to retrieve it?”

No—I never got to retrieve it. I locked myself out of my room.

“I see,” Prince Callan said.

The tone of voice he used confused her. It was knowing—as if he knew she had ulterior motives. She shrugged and scraped the side of the wooden bucket for more oatmeal.

“Tell me, Miss Dylan, where are you from?”

Had she been wrong? Was there a chance he’d seen her and remembered? Dylan munched on oatmeal and considered her answer. For the most part, selkies avoided contact with humans. They saved shipwrecked men in their seal bodies—as she’d saved him—and they did their trading in human bodies, but they never revealed to landers who or what they were—even though some landers knew selkies lived *somewhere* in Ringsted.

The coast, Dylan wrote, deciding it was a safe answer.

“Where on the coast?” Prince Callan persisted.

By the ocean, was her generic answer.

“Naturally,” Prince Callan said, his tone flat.

Dylan gave the prince a quirk of a smile and ate some more oatmeal. *The paintings here are magnificent.*

“You think so? I find them boring. It’s mostly men and women who have been dead for ages. The portrait gallery in the palace at Glenglassera is far superior. We have pieces from master artists there,” Prince Callan said.

Dylan shook her head. *Even if some of the paintings are funny, these artists were very skilled.*

“Funny? What do you mean by funny?” Prince Callan asked.

Dylan pointed to the lady with the questionable pet. *Is that a dog or a rat?*

“It’s a cat.”

No.

“It is. That is my great aunt. She was crazy about her cats.”

So she took pity on the poor thing?

“No, that’s a certain breed of cat.”

You mean they TRIED to make something like that? Dylan wrote, horrified.

Prince Callan laughed at Dylan’s shock. He had to turn away to compose himself before answering her. “Yes. Although I do agree with you; it’s rather ugly. Do they have painters where you are from?”

No. We lack artists of any kind—except for, perhaps, cloth weavers and the like.

“If you are an indication of your culture’s dancing ability, I should think it a fair trade,” Prince Callan said.

Dylan shrugged. *My sisters are better than me.*

“So you mentioned before. Tell me about your sisters.”

There’s Maureen, Mairead, Maili, Muriel, and Murphy.

“All M names.”

In honor of my father, Murron.

“But your name is Dylan,” Prince Callan said.

It is a boy’s name. Ma told Da he could name any boys she gave birth to, you see. But I have no brothers.

“Poor man,” Prince Callan commiserated. “It is an unusual name—a strong name—if you will excuse me for saying so.”

He wanted a Dylan—“son of the sea”—so he gave it to me even though I’m a girl.

“I see. It suits you. It is light and playful,” Prince Callan said.

She grinned. *So my family says. Ma still gives Da the eye and blames him whenever I get in trouble.* Her smile dimmed as she realized how badly she missed her parents.

“Your family is alive and well?”

She hesitated before she nodded slowly. They were well—for now. If she failed…

“Then why are you Jarlath’s ward?” Prince Callan asked, neatly closing the trap on her like an expert huntsman.

Dylan set her empty oatmeal bucket aside and thought. Should she tell the prince she had been taking unwillingly? But Jarlath had her pelt. If the prince moved against him, he would shred it.

She wrote, *Unfortunate circumstances.*

“I see,” Prince Callan said, his voice once again pitched in that knowing tone.

Dylan stretched her arms in front of her and stared at the painting of Glenglassera. Now that she knew what she was looking at, she could see the tall, quill-like towers marking out the royal palace.

“You are a puzzle, Miss Dylan,” the prince said. His too-easy smile was back in place.

What’s a puzzle?

“It’s a…a mind teaser,” Prince Callan said.

She stared at him.

“A mystery,” Prince Callan tried.

Oh. I am not. I just don’t chatter like a sea gull. Or rather, I can’t. It would take too long to write that much, she wrote, her confusion clearing.

“Is that an observation on female society?”

No. Cagney doesn’t squawk.

“She doesn’t; Dooley does it for her,” Prince Callan agreed, getting a silent chuckle from Dylan. “You enjoy their company?”

Cagney is very kind.

“And Dooley?”

Dooley is very funny, although I am under strict instructions to keep this information from him.

Prince Callan chuckled. “Cagney told you that, did she? Still, I must admire your resilience. Most women are mortified by the way Dooley acts. And dresses.”

Why?

“It is embarrassing. He can be quite the spectacle,” Prince Callan said.

Dylan sniffed disdainfully. *You landers worry too much about what others are thinking.*

Prince Callan’s mirth left his face as he tapped her slate. “You landers?”

She hesitated for a split second at her careless mistake. *It is an expression*, she wrote.

Prince Callan nodded.

She opened her mouth in a silent yawn. *If you will excuse me, I think I am finally tired enough to sleep, now that my belly is full.*

“Of course,” Prince Callan said, bowing. “Good evening, Miss Dylan.”

Dylan curtsied to the prince and picked up her oatmeal bucket, intending to return it to the kitchens before going to her room.

She thumped halfway down the portrait gallery when Prince Callan called after her, “Miss Dylan?”

Dylan turned around to face the prince as his long strides brought him closer to her.

“If the idea pleases you, would you like to accompany Lord Dooley, Cagney, and myself tomorrow? We will be going down to the village—Easky.”

Dylan thought the idea over. She had no idea how much longer Jarlath would be willing to stay in the Summer Palace—away from most of his armed guards and utterly distracted. Shouldn’t she be using this time to sneak around and observe the stocky lord?

But the village! So far she had enjoyed herself the most at Easky. Maybe there would be more dancing!

Perhaps I could ask Cagney about Jarlath. She might know what kind of business he’s involved in. She seems to know information on all the lords and ladies of Ringsted.

Won over by this thought, Dylan smiled and nodded at Prince Callan.

I would love to come with you. Thank you, she wrote.

“Excellent. We were going to head out first thing after breakfast. I’ll alert the kitchens so they will send your breakfast tray to your room. Unless you were planning to consume another bucket of oatmeal for your morning meal,” Prince Callan smiled, his eyes twinkling with the same light Dylan noticed at the ball.

It’s good oatmeal! And thank you. Until tomorrow?

“Until tomorrow. Sleep well, Miss Dylan,” Prince Callan said.

Dylan curtsied to the prince before she left the portrait gallery, idly wondering what had brought him to the portrait gallery at such an hour that he would stumble upon her.

Chapter 8
Eating in Easky

When Dylan's breakfast tray arrived, she was already awake and dressed in her red gown. The maid who delivered the tray—a tiny slip of a thing—yelped when she opened the door to find Dylan half-hanging out of her window, sniffing in the salty air.

The maid eyed her as if she were a wild animal before she set the tray down on a small end table and scurried out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Dylan shrugged and dug in to her food, leaving the window open. She was gratified to see the kitchen had given her a suitable portion instead of the sickly small plates most humans seemed to take. Every bit of it—from the poached eggs to the large bowl of oatmeal—was delicious. So it was with good humor that she barged into Jarlath's room, passing Bump and Lump on her way in.

Jarlath snored as loud as a male seal's warning bark. It was a miracle he hadn't sucked up the curtains of his bed with his great, snorting inhales. Dylan peered over the sleeping lord, disappointed. He was drooling and looked quite healthy, which meant he probably had not drunken himself into a stupor the previous night.

A pity. I should like to exploit that vice of his. I was rather hoping he hadn't learned his lesson. Testing to see how deeply Jarlath slept, Dylan opened the lid of the chest placed at the foot of his bed and slammed it shut.

Jarlath murmured in his sleep, turned over, and snored on.

I can't decide if he is stupid or brave. Why would he lock his door when he's out, but not when he's sleeping? Dylan dug through the chest, searching for her pelt. It was filled with nothing but clothes. She poked her head under his bed-frame and found dust and mice droppings.

She checked his desk for papers, which was littered with doodles and a half-written letter to a lady, declaring his love. Based on the smeared letters and the open inkwell, Jarlath had probably started it before falling into his bed.

She was considering where to search next when Bump opened the door and stuck his bald head inside. He grunted once and stared at her.

Dylan shrugged and joined her guards in the hall, pleased she had been able to search for even a few moments.

“Ocean?” Lump asked in his deep voice.

Dylan shook her head and wrote on her slate, *I’m visiting the village with friends.* She led the way down the hallway, out of the beachside palace, and up to the main wing.

There Cagney, Lord Dooley, and Prince Callan were waiting for her.

“Good morning, Miss Dylan,” Prince Callan said.

“Good morning, gem of the wondrous ocean.” Lord Dooley bowed deeply. Today he wore surprisingly plain clothes, for him—he sported a black cotton shirt, black trousers, and black boots. His brown curls were tousled on his head, giving him a boyish look. “The mere sight of you is uplifting and soothing to the soul.”

“I apologize, Miss Dylan,” Cagney said. “During the night, all of my lord’s stupidity rushes to his head.”

Good morning, Dylan wrote.

“Is Jarlath that worried we’re going to do something unseemly to you, ocean flower?” Lord Dooley asked, nodding his head at Bump and Lump, who trailed after them.

No, it’s me he doesn’t trust.

“I see,” he said, exchanging looks with Prince Callan.

“May we depart?” Cagney asked. She wore a dress similar to Dylan’s today, although hers was a no-nonsense brown, and the sleeves were more fitted and practical. “I should like to get the bulk of my errands finished before lunch.”

“As you wish, pearl of beauty,” Dooley said. He extended his arm, and Cagney pushed him away.

Prince Callan held out his hand. Dylan took out a piece of chalk, hung her pouch from his wrist, and hurried after Cagney.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Dooley said, his voice loud and booming. “We men are just unwanted extras in this communion between flowers.”

“You were the one who insisted on coming with us,” Cagney called over her shoulder as she and Dylan started down the wide, stone road that veered down the steep hill and led the way towards the palace wall and—beyond it—the village.

Dooley pouted, but Prince Callan grinned, that inexplicable hope lighting up his eyes again.

"Where to first, my dove?" Dooley asked when they passed through the wall that separated the palace from Easky.

"I need to speak with a barrel-maker," Cagney said, eyeing her list. "This way."

Dylan, Dooley, and Prince Callan trailed behind Cagney like puppies until she stopped outside a store. While she talked to a cooper, Dylan and Dooley stared at a stand that displayed pearls.

"Do you fancy pearls, Miss Dylan?" Prince Callan asked as he joined Dylan and Dooley.

Dylan shook her head. She *had* been wondering why the humans were selling pearls—whenever she found one in a mollusk, she tossed it or brought it home for selkie children to play with. But now she grudgingly admitted they made pretty adornments as Dooley bought a dozen pearl-topped hair pins.

"What gems do you prefer, then?" he asked, making polite conversation as he shook his head at Dooley.

Sea glass, Dylan wrote before wandering back to Cagney.

"*Sea glass*?" Prince Callan asked. "The stuff you can find on beaches?"

It's pretty.

"But it's not pricey or rare."

So?

Prince Callan stared at Dylan until they were interrupted by Dooley.

"I bought the earrings, too. What are the chances Cagney will wear these, do you think?" Dooley asked, holding up a pretty cloth pouch.

"Not good," Prince Callan said.

"Barrel prices are dropping, as expected, with the loss of trade," Cagney reported as she rejoined the group. "White Sands Trading Company should consider stocking up soon—although we might be able to get an even better price if we wait a little longer...what?" Cagney frowned when Dooley held the bag out to her.

"For you, pearl of my heart."

Cagney gave him a withering look and moved on.

Dooley resembled a kicked seal pup as he watched Cagney walk away.

Prince Callan coughed to cover up a chuckle.

“Tread carefully, Prince. You can’t afford to throw stones,” Dooley said, tying the bag to his belt.

“It’s not what you think,” Prince Callan said.

“Uh-huh,” Dooley said. He smiled at Dylan when he noticed her wrinkled forehead. “Don’t worry your head, ocean flower. It’s nothing to be upset over.”

“Miss Dylan, I suggest you leave the fool and his friend to rot with their empty-headed notions,” Cagney called.

Dylan trotted to catch up with the huffy young lady. When she drew shoulder to shoulder, she could see the pink blush on Cagney’s cheeks and hear the assistant’s mutters. “I will never understand what he is thinking. He’s the biggest fool in all of Ringsted. Wasting hard-earned money—on *pearls*!”

What is wrong with pearls? Dylan asked, her handwriting shaky as they hadn’t stopped walking.

“Nothing—they’re beautiful. But—oh, never mind,” Cagney said, the pink of her cheeks glowing brighter.

As you say, Dylan wrote. Privately she thought, *I don’t think I have ever seen a couple so obviously in love and so daft at expressing it.*

Next, Cagney visited a rope merchant.

Dooley and Dylan spent the time sniffing the wares of a perfume merchant just down the street. Dooley waved jars of pine, redwood, lavender, and hypercium oils under Dylan’s nose.

By the time she selected a jar scented with what he called pineapple—something Dylan had never heard of before—Dylan staggered out of the store feeling sick to her stomach.

“The scents didn’t agree with you?” Prince Callan asked as he leaned against the store.

No, Dylan wrote. *How can anyone stand that? The scents are so powerful you can almost SEE them.*

The tilt of his head looked curious. “What do you mean?”

Dylan rubbed her tender nose. What did she mean? How could he miss it! *Perhaps landers have a bad sense of smell,* Dylan thought before sneezing twice.

“Come on, I know what will clear your nose,” Prince Callan said, leading Dylan away from Cagney and Dooley, who were meeting in the middle of the street.

“Are you implying I *smell*?” Cagney said, her voice thunderous as Dooley offered up his newest gift, drawing Dylan’s attention.

“It’s fine; Cagney was coming to the fish market next anyway,” Prince Callan said, tempting her forward.

Fish? she wrote, feeling hopeful.

Prince Callan grinned and beckoned for her to follow.

Dylan chased after the prince, a hop in her steps. A smile burst on her face when they turned a corner, and the heavenly scent of fresh fish hit her.

Lunch, she wrote, misty-eyed.

“Breakfast is barely over, Miss Dylan,” Prince Callan chuckled.

She ignored him and waltzed forward, feeling like she was in a dream. Everywhere she looked, there were fish! Smelt, lampreys, salmon, hake, whiting, anchovies, herring, and rockfish! There were even squid, clams, lobster, prawns, and more.

“I think you found Miss Dylan’s version of pearls,” Dooley teased as he and Cagney rejoined them.

Cagney smacked Dooley. “Hold your tongue,” she ordered before she turned to Dylan and said—in a considerably kinder and softer voice, “There is a vendor selling grilled squid. Would you like some?”

She clasped her slate to her chest and raised her nose in the air, sniffing. Cagney smiled and looped her arm through Dylan’s, pulling her to the vendor. She bought a grilled squid on a stick for Dylan, patted her arm, and moved to talk with a fish merchant.

“You like squid?” Prince Callan asked.

Dylan stopped chomping on her snack long enough to nod enthusiastically.

“I also enjoy a good grilled squid. It’s a shame those of nobility don’t eat it; too snobby, I suppose,” Dooley said.

“Cagney defeated me. I thought you might like this area just because of all the food, Miss Dylan,” Prince Callan admitted.

YES, Dylan wrote, drawing a grin from the prince that touched his eyes.

“Good news, nothing has changed marketwise for fish vendors. Fish was never a resource that could be shipped overseas, though, so I did expect that,” Cagney said. “Next I need to see—”

“A cloth merchant,” Dooley said.

Cagney frowned. “No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do,” Dooley said.

“No. I don’t,” Cagney said, narrowing her eyes at Dooley.

“Yes, you do,” Dooley said, tipping his head in Dylan’s direction as Dylan ate the last of her squid.

“Oh. I do,” Cagney said, her voice wooden.

The group followed Cagney to a cloth merchant, although Dylan stopped to draw water from a fountain to clean her hands and face. She was sitting on the lip of the fountain, waiting for Cagney to finish, when Prince Callan approached her.

“Still hungry?” he asked.

Dylan squinted up at the prince. *I’m sure it would be bad manners to say yes*, she thought, and managed to hold her silence.

Prince Callan chuckled. “I’ll take that as a yes. Come on, I’ll buy you a snack.”

Dylan hopped off the fountain and trailed after Prince Callan like a sea lion pup. The prince led her to a man selling grilled sweet potatoes. He bought three and gave her the smallest.

“Eat that one first, and you can have the next one when you finish,” he said, holding up the two remaining sweet potatoes before walking towards the cloth seller Cagney was unhappily standing with.

Unwilling to let food out of her sight, Dylan kept pace with Prince Callan, following him through the open door and into the store.

“Cagney is too beautiful, Mistress Della, to hide in these subdued colors. Why not something bright?” Dooley asked.

“You have the fashion sense of a colorblind dog, Dooley. Your advice is not appreciated,” Cagney said.

“But he is right, Miss Cagney. A bright blue would suit you well and complement your blue eyes—as would an ice white,” the cloth merchant said, holding up a swatch of blue cloth to Cagney’s face.

Prince Callan cleared his throat, and the cloth merchant turned around.

“Oh, no, no, no,” the merchant said when she caught sight of Dylan chomping down on her sweet potato. “That red is all *wrong*. Your eyes are so beautiful—they must be expressed! Ocean blues, sea greens, both will underline the beauty of your eyes and the bronze of your skin.”

Dylan didn’t quite understand what the merchant was rattling on about. She looked up at Prince Callan, who offered her another sweet potato. “Just stand there and stay calm,” he advised.

Dylan shrugged and took the food, allowing the merchant to hold up swatch after swatch of cloth. When she finished the third sweet potato, Cagney took her by the arm and swept her out into the streets.

"Those fools. Why they can't tell you is beyond my understanding. You'll figure it out as soon as you get the first one," Cagney muttered.

Is something wrong? Dylan wrote.

"No, Dooley is just carrying on. I hate it when he drowns me in gifts."

Really? But you are blushing. I thought you were happy.

"What? I-I-I," Cagney stammered.

"That's finished. Next is the dressmaker, right, Cagney?" Dooley said as he and Callan slipped out of the store.

"Of course," Cagney said, as she wiped Dylan's slate clean. "Let's go."

Dooley stared at Cagney with wide eyes before looking at Prince Callan and Dylan. "What did you say to her?" Dooley asked.

Dylan started to reply, but Cagney swiped the slate from her. "Come, Dylan. There's a merchant who sells honey-flavored pastries next to the seamstress. We should try a few—my treat."

The pastries were as good as the palace's food. They were flaky on the outside and stuffed with cream cheese swirled with honey. Dylan closed her eyes in sheer delight as Cagney pulled her into the dressmaker's store with her.

"Miss Cagney, we've been expecting you. Lord Dooley said—ahhh, there she is. She *is* tall. Feeding you well, are they?" the seamstress—a short woman who scuttled like a crab—said as she squinted up at Dylan. "That's no trouble, though. Indeed, it makes you look even more elegant with the cloth mounded just right."

Again, she was lost in the terms and lingo of dresses, but Prince Callan appeared with a bag of the honey pastries while the woman measured Cagney and, oddly enough, her. Dylan kept her silence and ate a honey pastry.

When the seamstress stopped pulling on her limbs and measuring them with rope, Dylan took a huge bite out of a honey pastry. That was when she noticed the prince wasn't eating any.

You aren't going to have one?

Prince Callan shook his head. "Not today," he said with his pleasant smile.

You don't like them?

“I’ve never tried them, to be honest,” Prince Callan admitted.

Dylan stared at him with wide eyes before she extended her bitten-into honey pastry. Prince Callan pulled back a little and blinked at the pastry.

Try it, Dylan ordered, underling and circling her words before pushing the pastry at him again.

Bemused, Prince Callan took the pastry. He hesitated for a few moments before biting off the part Dylan had already started. He chewed for a moment, his expression guarded.

Well?

“It’s delicious,” Prince Callan admitted.

It is heaven in a crust, Dylan wrote before extending her hand. Prince Callan offered her the cloth bag, letting her dig out a new one as he finished off the rest of the pastry.

When the seamstress finished measuring Cagney, the assistant reached for the pouch of coins that hung from her cloth belt.

“No, no, gem of my heart. This is my treat, *remember*?” Dooley said with a winning smile.

Cagney frowned. “It’s inappropriate.”

“That’s too bad; you agreed to it this morning. Now shoo, and take Dylan with you,” he said.

Cagney exhaled loudly through her nose. “Come, Dylan,” she called, storming out of the store.

Mad again? Dylan asked.

“He can be so high-handed and yet completely unaware of how *inappropriate* it is for him to—grr!” Cagney stomped a foot.

Dylan patted her shoulder in commiseration.

“I don’t understand why he insists on carrying on—” Cagney broke off when a boy—probably a year or two older than Princess Nessa—squirmed between Dylan and Cagney, knocking into the shorter woman.

“Sorry miss,” the boy called over his shoulder.

“No trouble,” Cagney said, brushing herself off, but Dylan reached out and grabbed the boy by his shoulder and reeled him in like a fish.

“Dylan?” Cagney squinted in confusion.

Dylan turned the boy around so he faced her and held her hand out.

“What? I said I was sorry,” the boy squirmed in her grasp.

Dylan rolled her eyes and wriggled her fingers at the little thief who had swiped Cagney’s coin purse.

She had seen the move a hundred times before. In spite of all the fish in the ocean, everyone—from Dylan's selkie kin, to sea and river otters—were experts at stealing fish. She had a cousin who used the same tactic the boy had—bumping into his target.

The boy turned white and began trembling in Dylan's grip as he stared up at her. *For heaven's sake*, she thought as village folk stared at them. She patted him on the head and led him to a nearby wall, smiling all the while. Using the wall to keep the boy hemmed in, Dylan managed to write, *Give my friend's coin purse back to her*.

The boy sucked his head into his neck as Cagney glanced at Dylan's slate and felt for her missing coin pouch.

When Bump and Lump appeared, blocking out the sun behind Dylan and Cagney, they were the final nail in the coffin.

The boy burst into tears and held out the coin purse. "Please don't tell nobody. Ma will tan my hide, and the royals will hang me from the noose and scatter my limbs to the sea if you turn me in."

Cagney melted at the sight. "Oh, hush. No harm was done. Dylan you can—"

Dylan took her slate and whacked the boy on the head, startling him into silence.

"Dylan!" Cagney said, drawing back in shock.

Count your coins, Cagney, Dylan wrote. She was certain the urchin had swiped some of the coins already. She heard a jingle when the boy passed the pouch over and saw him try to cover a glint of metal in his grubby hands.

When Cagney started counting her coins a second time, Dylan held her hand out again.

The boy scowled up at Dylan, but passed several coins to her. She handed the coins to Cagney.

"What should we do?" Cagney asked.

Dylan tapped her chin before she wrote back, *Have you got any shark fishers in the area?*

The boy yelped at the words and started squirming. "I'm sorry. I'll change to the path of the righteous! I'm sorry I ever laid eyes on you two hags!"

"You aren't winning points for sweetness, boy." Cagney folded her arms across her chest and eyed the boy.

Behind Dylan, Bump grunted and scratched his cheek with a dagger.

"Easky has a sheriff," Lump said.

The boy went stiff with real fear, his eyes wide as he stared at the hulking guards.

Dylan waved the pair off. *Callan and Dooley?* She wrote.

The boy started breathing quicker.

"Prince Callan would have the boy thrown in the brig in a second. Lord Dooley—" Cagney cut herself off when the boy stomped on Dylan's foot, earning a soundless yelp. He rammed her with his sharp elbows, knocking her into Cagney. He then ducked Lump's meaty hand and darted away, kicking up dust behind him as he sped off like a frightened fish.

Dylan charged after, but Cagney grabbed her wrist and yanked her back. "It's fine. No harm was done."

It is not fine!

"Yes, it is. You got my coin purse back," Cagney said, leading the way back to the seamstress's store.

Dylan turned her eyes on her guards. *You won't catch him?*

Bump cleaned his fingernails with his dagger, and Lump shook his head. "Can't leave you, Miss Dylan," he said.

She scowled at her guards.

"Leave well enough alone, Dylan," Cagney said.

He will pickpocket someone else.

"Perhaps, but I think he will leave Easky first. Normal folk don't throw Prince Callan's name around like a dry good."

You are enabling him!

"I am not," Cagney said.

No? What is the definition of allowing someone to continue with destructive behavior? She felt proud of herself for using some of Mairead's more high-brow vocabulary.

"Fine, we will give his description to the guards at the palace wall. Would that make you feel better?"

Dylan's pursed her lips at her friend, but held her pointer finger and thumb an inch apart to indicate how much it would improve her mood.

"Whose description are you giving to the guards?" Dooley asked, drawing their attention.

Cagney sighed. "A pickpocket."

Dylan scowled. *He got away. Cagney wouldn't let me chase him.*

“A pickpocket? In Easky?” Dooley said. He whistled. “Those bandits are getting bolder by the hour.”

What? Dylan wrote, perking with interest.

“What happened?” Prince Callan asked, ignoring Dylan’s question.

“He swiped my coin purse. Dylan stopped him and got it back for me.”

“And he got away?” Prince Callan asked.

“He squirmed away when we were deciding what to do with him,” Cagney said.

You should have let me chase him.

Cagney rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t worth the effort. Besides, having all of Easky seeing you chase after the boy like a silent deerhound would put the village in an uproar and shatter your already fragile reputation.”

My reputation for what? Being mute?

“How did he get away from you?” Prince Callan asked.

Dylan renewed her scowl.

“Let’s not speak of that part. We had best go report him before continuing with the rest of my errands,” Cagney sighed, pushing a lock of her brown hair out of her face.

“Think of the others he might rob, my dove,” Dooley said.

Fine wrinkles spread across Cagney’s forehead. “I know. It’s just—he was so *young*.”

Dooley patted her hand before offering his arm.

To everyone’s surprise—including Cagney’s—Cagney placed her hand in the crook of Dooley’s elbow. He escorted her in the direction of the palace gate, his eyes wide, and his mouth silent with shock.

Dylan and Prince Callan watched them go in awe.

It must have upset her more than I thought, Dylan wrote.

“Cagney has a secret soft spot for children,” Prince Callan said. “Shall we go with them?”

Yes. I want to make sure she gives them an accurate description. Dylan plowed after her friends—Bump and Lump following.

Prince Callan walked at her side. He watched her for several strides before he reached out and took her hand in his, much like his little sister had the day they showed Dylan around the palace.

Dylan blinked at the foreign gesture before she smiled at Prince Callan and swung their joint hands. She was surprised to find that holding hands was almost as comforting as piling with her sisters for an afternoon nap in

the sun. Not quite, but it was close enough and warm enough that it brought a smile to her lips.

Prince Callan watched her expression change, and his shifted to match it. The corners of his mouth turned upwards and he squeezed her hand. This time, she saw the smile in his eyes.

Three days later, Dylan came inside from her morning romp in the ocean—salt crusted and windblown. Bump and Lump trailed behind her, but Dylan stopped outside Jarlath's room. She could hear him pacing back and forth inside and rolled her eyes in disgust before moving on to her room.

She still hadn't gotten to search thoroughly. At the royal dinner, he had fallen violently in love with a Lady Shauna and spent most of next day cooped up, writing bad poetry and terrible love letters. He went out at night. Dylan had tried following him twice, but Bump and Lump stopped her each time, and they wouldn't let her in his room while he was gone.

It was frustrating enough to send Dylan into a silent tantrum, but she could only set her shoulders and keep trying. Giving up wasn't an option, and failure would not be accepted.

She hoped Jarlath would attend the garden party the royal family was throwing that afternoon so she could ditch her guards and try once more.

Inside her own room, she shut her door and threw herself on her bed, almost smashing a cloth-wrapped bundle. A plain piece of paper lay on the bundle, reading:

For this afternoon.
More will arrive this evening.

Dylan set the paper aside and unwrapped the bundle. Out spilled rich fabric, tailored into a garment her size—a dress of blue silk that reminded her of the sparkling ocean in the noon sun. The dress wasn't like the ones the noble ladies wore; it was better. It had a white kirtle made of breathable, gauzy material and overlaid with lace. The blue gown was more form-fitting than Dylan's saffron gown or red gown. It fit snug at the bust and waist, and the skirt flowed down like a waterfall as opposed to poofing. Its sleeves were fitted and cut off at the elbow, and a ribbon that

was the same ocean-blue color laced the gown together across the stomach.

I don't think Cagney could afford to get me more than one…Dooley could, perhaps, because he is so eccentric. Dylan silently snorted, amused by the idea. *Yes, it must be Dooley, trying to win favor with Cagney by making me more presentable. I will thank them this afternoon at the garden party—before I shake Bump and Lump.*

She ran a hand over the gown with pleasure. It hadn't bothered her that she had two dresses—clothes were just clothes after all—but the ocean blue color of her new dress was so *beautiful*.

As long as I must be stuck here, perhaps I better understand nobility's obsession with clothes, Dylan thought.

Chapter 9
Breaking and Entering

When Dylan knocked on Jarlath's door right before the garden party, the ruddy-faced tyrant opened the door and blinked at Dylan, taking in her new dress. "Where in the blazes did you get that?" He shook his head when Dylan reached for her slate. "No mind, I don't rightly care. Look, you will have to escort yourself to the garden party, you hear? Lady Shauna has agreed to let me follow her to the party. She'll get mad at me if I have you trailing me like a dog. So get." Jarlath made a shooing motion, stepped into the hallway, and locked his door.

Dylan rolled her eyes at Jarlath before she went off on her own. Lady Shauna said she would let Jarlath *follow* her to the party, that meant he wouldn't walk in with her, the dunce.

The party—much less formal than the ball—was to be held in a garden just off the main palace. There were the usual party staples—musicians, food, and drink—but no dancing. Instead, everyone was viewing flowers and shrubs trimmed to resemble animals—or they were supposed to. Mostly the nobles ignored the gardens and sat on silk cushions or walked in groups, talking about business, gossip, and fashion.

Cagney was already there, drinking an alcoholic beverage with a sour expression, which cleared when she saw Dylan. "Miss Dylan, you look beautiful."

Dylan smiled and smoothed her gown. *Thank you. You do, too,* Dylan wrote. The personal assistant was still wearing a subdued dress, but it must have been one of her new ones, for it was a blueish-purple that softened her eyes and hair and was much brighter than her usual colors.

Cagney pressed her lips together and didn't reply to Dylan's compliment.

Where is Dooley?

Cagney scowled and tossed back the rest of her drink. "Making an entrance," she said, her voice icy.

"It is often said, the most beautiful flowers of Ringsted grow in the Summer Palace," Dooley boomed. His voice was loud and carried over the

mosquito-like buzz of the partygoers.

Dylan turned to see Dooley, being lowered in a sort of rope swing from the ballroom patio. Pink flower petals fell with him, matching his coral pink waistcoat and tri-corner hat, and complementing his white breeches.

“But I see even more beautiful, priceless flowers of youth and beauty before me, arranged in bouquets of elegance and refinery,” Dooley finished.

Cagney groaned and massaged her forehead with her palms, but the lords and the ladies—used to Lord Dooley’s eccentricities and accepting of them due to his vast fortune—clapped.

When Dooley’s swing reached the grassy ground, he bowed deeply, eliciting more claps.

“I should kill him,” Cagney said, her voice thoughtful and her eyes narrowed.

Think of the work you would have to do if he was gone, Dylan wrote.

“It would be *less*!”

Exactly, Dylan wrote.

Cagney frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Before Dylan could reply, Dooley swept up to them, smelling of flowers and flashing his dazzling smile. “Good afternoon, ladies. Both of you look beautiful! Did you enjoy my entrance? Was it not poetic?” he asked, puffing out his chest.

“It was terrible. I can’t believe you can happily show your face,” Cagney said, getting a dainty pewter plate and starting to pile it with food.

“Why not? Wasn’t it lovely?”

“It was embarrassing!”

“It would have been even better if you rode in on the swing with me, jewel of my desire.”

Cagney looked like she was going to disembowel Dooley with the pastry tongs, so Dylan slid her slate between them.

Thank you for the dress, Lord Dooley.

“Oh, it wasn’t me,” Dooley said with a big smile.

Dylan blinked. *Cagney?*

“Not I.” Cagney placed a roll on the mountain of food heaped on the plate.

Then who was it?

“I can’t say, for he wished to remain unnamed,” Dooley winked before staring in Prince Callan’s direction.

Dylan blinked, trying to process it.

“Though I will be sure to pass your thanks along. However, I suspect presenting yourself to him whilst looking so lovely would be thanks enough for your admirer,” Dooley said.

Dylan self-consciously brushed the fabric of her new dress. *Prince Callan bought my dress? But…why?* Her thoughts swirled in a confused tangle, so Dylan took the safest path and shoved the dress and its purchaser from her mind and instead concentrated on food. *What kind of pastry is this?*

“Stop acting ridiculous, Dooley” Cagney passed the filled plate to Dylan. “All of Easky knows Prince Callan bought Dylan a slew of dresses. I would be surprised if there wasn’t a lord or lady who didn’t know.”

“You don’t approve?” Dooley asked as Dylan dug into her plate.

“It’s not that. It was very kind of him to see that Dylan is…properly outfitted. But did he need to do it in such a public fashion?” Cagney asked.

“You said it was a good idea when we talked about it the morning before we visited Easky, Cagney—that was when we had you measured,” Dooley said to Dylan.

Dylan shrugged, content to watch the two discuss her clothes and voice her various questions and concerns while she stuffed her face.

“Because I thought he would be more discreet. It’s inappropriate.”

“How was it inappropriate?” Dooley asked, his good cheer still infusing his words. “Her guardian doesn’t see that she is clothed, so our prince did.”

“Yes, he gave her clothes as a *personal* gift. It comes attached with his name and all that intones. It is cruel of him to do that as there is no deeper meaning besides kindness in his actions.”

“How can you know that? You cannot presume to see into his heart. Perhaps our little…tall ocean flower makes his heart swell with delight,” Dooley said. His words were still pleasant, but Dylan thought she could detect a hint of a strain to his voice. She suspected Dooley was no longer talking about Prince Callan’s feelings toward her, but about his own for Cagney. Cagney, however, didn’t seem to see it.

“I don’t care what he thinks or feels!” Cagney suddenly burst. When a few people looked in their direction, she ground her teeth and forced her to

lower her voice. “Can’t you see he has just about hanged Dylan, socially speaking? Women will *hate* her for this. Lady Aisling cannot ignore such a blatant action! All the scorn he thought to shield Dylan from? The insensibility of his actions has just opened the floodgates to subject her to it at a far worse intensity!” Cagney hissed.

Dooley blinked. “Oh,” he said. “We didn’t think of that.”

“He has no right to treat Dylan with such favoritism as long as his engagement to Lady Aisling stands,” Cagney said.

Dylan nodded seriously. *One must be loyal to their intended.*

“It was never made official,” Dooley said.

“No, it is more than official. His parents publically approved of their relationship, and he spent the past season escorting her everywhere,” Cagney said.

Dooley dipped his head toward Dylan. “The bottom line—in case you were wondering, ocean flower—is that Cagney is concerned for you. You must be a great favorite of hers indeed. I have never heard her speak out against Callan before.”

Cagney blushed and lifted her chin. “That is because the prince has never done anything so insensible before. It is as if he has lost his head.”

“Sometimes there are certain things…or people…that make men insensible,” Dooley said, his brown eyes were soft as butter when he looked at Cagney.

Dylan munched on her food and looked back and forth between the pair, wondering if she could take her food elsewhere.

“Has Dooley ruined another business deal and earned your wrath, Cagney? I could feel your ire across the gardens,” Prince Callan said, joining the conversation. He stood next to Dylan and stole a tart from her plate.

“No—for once. We were just discussing—” Dooley started.

“Nothing of importance. Good afternoon, Your Highness,” Cagney curtsied.

“Good afternoon. You look beautiful, Miss Dylan, as do you, Miss Cagney,” Prince Callan smiled.

Thank you for the dress, she wrote, remembering her manners.

“So I’ve been outed, have I? You’re welcome. It looks beautiful with your eyes,” he said.

“Callan.”

Lady Aisling stood beyond the group, her voice flat.

"Good afternoon, Lady Aisling," Prince Callan said with his insincere smile.

"I wish to see the flowers from Loire. Escort me there?" she asked, her tone expectant.

"Of course," Prince Callan said, nodding to Dooley, Cagney, and Dylan. He swiped another tart from Dylan's plate before approaching the young lady and extending his arm.

Lady Aisling took it and walked off with the prince. As she looked back over her shoulder, her eyes darkened with ice and disdain. Then, she turned, smiled, and started talking to Prince Callan.

The trio watched in silence.

"Perhaps you are right, Cagney," Dooley said. "Callan is an idiot for not correcting Lady Aisling yet."

"She's going to eat Dylan alive." Concern creased Cagney's brow.

Dylan finished the food on her plate and set it aside. *She's welcome to try*, she wrote. *I doubt she can do more damage than sharks.*

Dooley read the slate and chortled. "You have a funny way of putting things, Miss Dylan."

Cagney said nothing, but gave her a look of scrutiny.

Dylan reread her slate with a frown. She was being serious.

Typically sharks didn't attack selkies—they knew better than to mess with the guardians of the ocean. But as Dylan was a sea lion, and all other selkies were seals, she'd been attacked by sharks on three separate occasions. One bit her shoulder before her sisters could rescue her.

It had hurt worse than anything Dylan had encountered before, but she had survived. *Some dainty little blonde can't be worse than a shark*, she thought before she caught sight of Jarlath, trailing Lady Shauna like a lovesick duckling.

The sight did some good to Dylan's heart, but it took her several moments to realize what that meant.

Jarlath is away from his room. If I can ditch Bump-and-Lump, I can search it! But how could she lose them?

Dylan looked around the gardens, hoping to find tall shrubbery or a line of trees. Nestled into the palace wall, there was a mass of shrubbery. She stared at it, her forehead wrinkling.

“That’s a maze,” Dooley said, noticing Dylan’s interest. “It’s pitifully small. There used to be a bigger one, but Princess Fianna got lost in it once as a child, so the queen had it mowed down.”

I will be back, Dylan wrote. She crossed the green lawn and approached the maze. She glanced over at her shoulder and waved off Cagney’s expression of concern while watching for her guards out of the corner of her eye. They stood in the shadow of the palace, their gaze fixated on her.

Dylan sashayed into the maze—it was just a few inches taller than she was. She found her way through the hedges, popping out on the other side.

A door into the palace stood just past the maze. She peeked around the hedge. Lump was speaking to Bump, their attention diverted. Dylan wrenched the door open and threw herself into the palace. She made her way to the kitchen where a plump cook from Loire was at work.

“Mademoiselle Dylan, how delightful you look!” The cook kissed his fingertips and threw his hand to the ceiling. She knew all of the kitchen staff with great familiarity, but the Loire chef was among her favorites—he was forever cooking up exotic platters and treats for her to try whenever she visited. “All pretty for the party—Princess Elle herself would approve of your dress.”

Thank you, she wrote. *I’m sorry, but my guardian has swiped my room key and is occupied for the day. Could I trouble someone to find the chamberlain to help me open my room?*

“For you? Anything, Mademoiselle,” the cook chuckled. “Neil, fetch the lady’s key for her from the chamberlain. Don’t keep the lady waiting!”

“Aye, sir,” the kitchen boy said, turning to her. “What be yer room, yer ladyship?”

Dylan described Jarlath’s room, and the young boy trotted off, disappearing from the kitchens.

“You wait in the hallway. You will wilt in this heat and ruin your dress,” the cook said, shooing her out.

She moved to write on her slate, but the cook held up his hands. “No, no! No protests. You eat this and wait for Neil,” the cook said, shoving a dish layered with whipped cream and sugared berries in her hand.

Dylan ate in delight, wrote a slate *full* of praise, and returned the dish to the cook. By the time she’d finished, Neil was back.

“ ’ere you are. Chamberlain said to keep it, and Lord Jarlath is a dunce—tho—I wasn’t supposed to tell you that,” Neil said, placing the key in her extended hand.

Encouraged by this great turn of events, Dylan ruffled Neil’s hair as she left the kitchens, navigating her way through the main wing of the palace with ease. She slipped outside and had just stepped onto the stone bridge that stretched between the main wing and the beach wing, when a voice stopped her.

“There you are. Cagney has been looking all over for you,” Prince Callan said.

She swore colorfully and with great imagination in her mind as she turned to face Prince Callan. This was one of her few chances to search Jarlath’s room. The dunce could fall out of love with Lady Shauna any day and choose to return to Kingsgrace—which would mean imprisonment. She *had* to find her pelt before then.

If only Prince Callan wasn’t such a concerned host—what is wrong with him? Did someone steal his fish?

The handsome prince watched her, his eyes narrowed and his smile absent. “What took you away from the party? Wasn’t there enough food?” he asked.

She tried to think of a good reply, but there wasn’t one that wouldn’t require an outrageous lie or a few choice words, so she made no move to write on her slate.

“Come on,” Prince Callan said, holding out his hand.

Dylan’s brow furrowed as she stared at him. Callan was *angry*. Dylan didn’t understand why, but his anger was obvious, stirring in his eyes and shadowing the corners of his mouth.

When she didn’t accept his hand, Prince Callan walked forward and took hers, leading her in the direction of the gardens.

Dylan, with her long legs, kept the pace and let him tow her along.

They rejoined the party with little fuss.

Unfortunately, the two people Dylan most hoped wouldn’t notice her absence, Bump and Lump, saw Callan escort her in from an entirely different direction than they had last seen her. She had hopes that they might write it off, but judging how they stood together, far from their original post, it was likely they had started looking for her before Callan took it upon himself to return her to the party.

Dooley and Cagney were seated on a stone bench strewn with tasseled pillows. When Dylan and Prince Callan strolled into view, Cagney's relief was obvious.

"You're fine—good," Cagney said.

"She was worried some of the court hags were bullying you in a forsaken corner of the garden," Dooley said.

Callan released her hand, and she plopped down in the space between Cagney and Dooley, squeezed between her friends. She smiled as she brushed shoulders with them and felt just a little bit better with the warm contact.

Callan bowed to the trio. "Enjoy," was all he said before leaving them.

"Something's got his waistcoat in a knot," Dooley said, watching his friend place a smile on his face and greet other guests. "Did he say anything to you, Dylan?"

She shook her head. *Even though he* ruined *my search-mission. I wonder if I could forge a letter in Lady Shauna's hand to lure Jarlath out…*

"Odd," Cagney said.

"I'll speak to him tonight," Dooley promised. "We'll discuss it over tea."

Cagney adjusted a lock of her hair. "Wouldn't drinks be more customary?"

"Only for those who are unrefined and not dedicated disciples of elegance," Dooley winked, looking ridiculous in his pink waistcoat.

"Forget I asked, please," Cagney muttered.

For the remainder of the party, Dylan spent most of her time by the snacks or penned in by Cagney and Dooley. Her moves were always shadowed by Bump and Lump—who were no longer stationary, but moved around the perimeter of the gardens, grim reminders that she was not on her own schedule.

If she ever strayed far from her friends, Prince Callan would appear and, politely but irrefutably, escort her back to Cagney's side. Dylan wasn't sure why he suddenly showed the herding characteristics of a dog, but it was troublesome.

When the garden party ended at twilight, she was relieved to return to her room.

"Did you enjoy your stroll in the maze, Miss Dylan?" Lump asked as she led the way to the beachside wing.

She stopped and turned to look at her guards. They wore bland expressions, but Bump was fondling a dagger hilt, and Lump's bushy eyebrows were raised above his sharp eyes.

Dylan nodded before she picked up her path again. *Perhaps Jarlath will be absent from his room tonight. With luck he will be out bemoaning his lack of progress with Lady Shauna. I could conduct a search if Bump-and-Lump turn in early.*

When Dylan reached her room, Lump said, "We'll be here all evening, Miss Dylan." As if they could read her thoughts.

The unornamented words made Dylan shiver as she was reminded that they were Jarlath's men. *So much for sneaking around.* Dylan shut herself in her room, grateful to avoid both her "guardian" and "guards."

After a week of failed search attempts, Dylan's nerves were worn thin. Jarlath must have exercised his miniscule mental abilities and hidden her pelt in an extraordinary spot as she had yet to sniff out so much as a hint of it. She was the daughter of *King Murron*, and the best singer of the Ringsted selkies, yet a puffed up dunce was outmaneuvering her. It was *enraging*.

She wished she had listened to the enchantress and notified her family before brashly throwing herself into enemy hands. She could no longer feel even the faintest trace of selkie crooning—although the sea witch's black magic still fouled the oceans with constant storms.

Dylan pressed her lips together and squinted at the dazzling ocean. Behind her, noblewomen giggled and talked, fluttering around the royalty. Queen Etain, Prince Callan, Prince Viggo, and some of their friends were present. Dooley and Cagney were not. Over the past few days, Dylan's time at the ocean had become something of a social hour—particularly since Princess Nessa heard about it and started coming out every morning with her. It was surprisingly early for nobility, but Dylan had been on the beach for two hours before anyone joined her. Unfortunately, the ocean seemed to be in an equally bad temper, and had done little to bolster her sagging spirits.

"Dylan, did you see that wave? It was *huge*!" Princess Nessa called. She was playing in the ocean tides that seemed unnaturally high

considering how close to shore she stood.

She broke out of her foul mood long enough to smile and waved to the princess, but as soon as the young girl went back to playing, Dylan's puckered look returned.

"What's wrong?" Prince Callan asked, handing her a fancy glass goblet of apple cider.

Dylan sipped the liquid, but instead of quenching her thirst, the cider was sour on her tongue. She handed the goblet back to Callan. *Something is not right,* she wrote.

Callan looked back at the socializing nobles. "Do you also think it is unnatural for Viggo to be up so early?" he joked.

No. It's the ocean. Something's not right. It's…bitter, Dylan wrote, struggling to put her feelings into words. Everything was off. The ocean was darker than usual, and the sea brine stung Dylan's eyes instead of soothing her nose. She could feel it in her bones the same way she could feel whale songs. Something was wrong.

Dylan looked over to see if Callan was laughing at her. To her surprise, he looked disturbed. He caught her eyes, nodded, and retreated back to the nobles. "Mother, shouldn't we return to the palace? Father has that trade meeting soon, and he wanted both of us to attend," he said.

Dylan paced a few steps, keeping her eyes on the ocean as the skirt of her saffron gown twisted around her ankles. She rubbed her nose and watched the water before she approached it, standing up to her ankles when the tide rushed in. Dylan closed her eyes and listened. There were no whales nearby, but neither were there storms. She could feel the faintest flickers of the typhoon from farther up the coast, and it wasn't moving at all. The seawater dragged sand over her feet as it retreated…and it didn't come back.

Dylan's eyes shot open when she felt it. A water horse. Dylan looked for the swell of water that would accompany an attacking kelpie. To her horror, she saw a huge wave, taller than she was, not twenty feet from Princess Nessa—who was grinning at it.

Dylan tried to scream, but nothing would come out. She ran, her heart pounding in her throat. She and the wave closed in on Nessa…but Dylan reached her first. She grabbed the smiling princess and hauled her backwards.

“What? Dylan—what are you doing!” the princess shouted just as the kelpie burst from its wave, screaming and shrieking.

Dylan dragged Nessa far enough up the beach that the monster would have to leave the water to chase them. She hoped it would be enough of a deterrent, but the water horse was bold, and it leaped from its wave—which stood up unnaturally instead of crashing down.

Dylan pushed the princess up the shore towards Callan who was sprinting towards them. As she grabbed a large rock, she saw Callan toss Nessa over his shoulder and run up towards his brother and their friends—who had their swords out.

Dylan flung her rock at the oncoming kelpie, cracking the beast in the face. It stopped but didn’t retreat, and it shrieked again in pain and hunger.

Dylan plucked her dagger from the bosom of her gown, grabbed another rock, and ran towards the beast. The best plan to survive a kelpie encounter was to flee and avoid it altogether, but if you were cornered, it was smartest to bluff and come out fighting.

“*Dylan*!” Callan shouted.

She ignored him and raised her second rock in the air. She held it poised to strike as she soundlessly snarled at the beast.

The water horse hissed—a sound like steam rising from water. It shook its scraggly mane, flecking the sand with black foam.

Dylan slapped her skirt as she took up a standard defensive stance, her dress ripping. Her hair blew in the whipping wind, and she opened her mouth in a wordless threat.

I’m so stupid! What kind of selkie bluffs when she can’t use her powers? My sisters are right. I need to think more before I act.

The kelpie stepped forward, and Dylan whipped her rock at it, cracking it in the head again. The water horse reared up but took two steps backwards. It shook its head and dove back into the ocean making the water swirl backwards unnaturally, just as Callan skid to a stop next to her, his sword outstretched.

Dylan’s shoulders slumped, and she almost dropped her dagger, shivering. *I don’t think I have ever been so foolish in my entire life as I have been the past month. Getting my pelt stolen, my voice sealed, challenging a kelpie without any real means of defense—what other stupid thing can I do?*

“You idiot.” Callan wrapped an arm around Dylan and swept her into a bone-crushing hug. “You could have gotten yourself *killed*!”

She exhaled and dropped her head to rest it on Callan’s lean shoulder, her eyes still on the ocean. *Something brought that kelpie here. They aren’t normally drawn to civilization. It’s too dangerous for them. They pick on the stragglers; those who are alone. What was it doing approaching such a large party of humans?*

Before she had a chance to further ponder the matter, Callan abruptly, but not cruelly, pushed her away from him. One of his hands still held his unsheathed sword. The other he clasped on her shoulder. He stared at her for a moment, then let her go and smoothed her hair. “Is everyone alright?” he asked, turning his face from Dylan, although he did not walk away from her.

The party was in hysterics. Multiple women were crying; one or two had even swooned.

“Nessa is fine,” Prince Viggo said. “She’s just upset—ouch—don’t bite, you little cretin!” he said before the young princess evaded his grip. She went running down the shore and threw herself at Dylan, bursting into tears.

Dylan discreetly slid her dagger back into place—hoping Bump and Lump hadn’t seen it—before she patted the little girl on the head. This seemed to make the princess cry harder. At a loss, Dylan bent over and picked her up, just like her father used to do when she was Nessa’s age.

Nessa sobbed into her shoulder, and Dylan rocked her body back and forth in a soothing motion as the little girl ringed her arms around her neck. She wanted to croon to the child, to sing her reassurances. But her throat was silent, so all she could do was pat the girl and carry her back to the hysterical Queen Etain.

“My baby,” Queen Etain sobbed, holding out her arms.

Dylan set Nessa on the ground, and the little girl threw herself at her mother, mashing her face into the fabric of the queen’s dress.

Dylan watched the reunion for a few moments before she marched back down the beach and sloshed into the ocean, knee deep. Callan was there with her, ruining his shiny black boots. “Dylan, get out of the water. You can return here when we can confirm it is safe,” he said.

She held up her hand and listened.

Although the feeling of wrong had lessened a little, it was still there, creeping in with the waves, coating the soft sand—a vile smear on a place that was meant to be clear. Tilting her head, Dylan walked down the shore, following the feeling. Callan, two of Viggo's friends, and Bump and Lump trailed in her wake. One of Viggo's friends tried to speak, but Callan put a hand in front of him, cutting off the remark.

They followed the sandy beach to a small bay, and the feeling and stench of *wrongness* grew more pungent and powerful. Dylan almost wretched when the beach met an outcropping of rocks. She scrambled up the slick, black slabs, and was picking her way across their surface when she spotted what was wrong.

A baby sea otter had been caught between the rocks. Dylan slid down the slab, skinning her legs and palms, and plunged into the ocean. She was chest-deep in water, but she managed to pick up the otter, her heart breaking as she trudged back to shore, clasping the small, dead pup to her chest.

It was slashed and drained of blood—a casualty of the sea witch. It couldn't have been more than eight weeks old. Smaller than a house cat, and unbearably light in her arms, it still had its soft, fluffy baby fur.

Dylan collapsed on the warm sand, her legs unable to hold her up as she held the innocent pup. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she stared at the babe she had failed to protect.

The sea witch did this. I have done nothing to stop her, and she has killed and slaughtered the innocent.

Her chest heaved as she stroked the baby otter's matted fur.

I am no closer to stopping her than I was before. She is out there, free and breathing, and I sit here in a big house of rocks and sip cider as the ocean suffers! Dylan was disgusted with herself, heartbroken for the defenseless sea otter that had paid for her inaction with its life.

"It's just a sea otter," one of Viggo's friend said.

The vehement look Dylan gave him made him swallow and look uncomfortable.

Callan crouched at her side, his wet boots making a sloshing noise. "Do you want to bury it?" he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded, and placed the otter on the beach, brushing a few grains of sand from its whiskers.

Her anger boiling, Dylan turned to face the ocean. The water was white with cresting waves, and the wind whipped Dylan's soaked gown and damp hair. She walked so she was knee deep in the water again, hoping that somehow, she would be heard. That—in spite of her locked voice—her magic would make her message clear.

I will find you, sea witch, she vowed. *I will find you, and I will rip you from limb to limb.* Too long, she'd wasted time, distracted by meaningless things. *No more,* she seethed. *I will hunt you until my heart stops beating, and I will forever dog your steps. I will crush your human partner, and I will end this innocent bloodshed. You will* pay*!*

As if the ocean understood, or as if her voice was heard and her magic felt, the ocean roared and hit the rocks with violent waves that sprayed salt water in the air like white, foamy fireworks.

The sea as her witness—she would *end* this.

"You have the eternal gratitude of the Ringsted Royal Family, Miss Dylan," King Rory said. He stood behind an armchair in his study, gripping it with emotion. "If you hadn't reached Nessa…" He shook his head.

I am glad she is safe, Dylan wrote.

"Thanks to you," Prince Viggo said, placing a comforting arm around Princess Fianna.

"My wife would join me in expressing our gratitude, but she is somewhat unwilling to leave Nessa at this moment," King Rory said. "We cannot repay you for your act of bravery."

Dylan flattened her lips, thinking of the baby otter. *I haven't been that brave,* she thought.

"We mean it, Dylan," Callan said, coming to stand next to her. "No one else was close enough to Nessa to pull her to safety. We're in your debt for Nessa's life."

"Ask us for anything, and it will be yours," King Rory promised.

I want my hands around the sea witch's neck. I want to toss Jarlath in the deepest dungeon, Dylan thought. Instead, she wrote, *I am already indebted to the royal family for your kind treatment and generosity. I am glad I could help.*

As the royal family read her words, Dylan thought, *This is a battle I must settle alone. Landers would only complicate it.*

The king and his children barely finished reading Dylan's slate when the door banged open.

Jarlath entered the room with an elaborate bow. "Your Majesty, I heard the news and was told how brave my ward was. I'm sure glad she was there to pull Princess Nessa to safety," Jarlath said, rubbing his hands as a greedy light shone from his face.

Dylan watched the ruddy-faced lord for a moment to see if he was mad at her. Judging by the sheer delight etched on his face, he was trying to use the situation for his own gains.

I suppose that's better than being angry and ruining my pelt, Dylan thought, although her mouth puckered in distaste as she watched her "guardian."

"I'm happy she was able to do the royal family such a service," Jarlath rambled on. "There is no need to thank her. She does only what I taught her."

Dylan rolled her eyes at the outrageous lie, but the royal family was too kind to notice. Rather, most of them were. Callan watched Dylan with a surprising intensity.

"Miss Dylan certainly proved her bravery," King Rory said. "And her handiness with rocks and a dagger."

Jarlath blinked, looking much like a frog. "Uh…dagger?"

Dylan's eyes widened, and she scribbled on her slate, *It was lucky that the kelpie gave up. Usually they are not so bold to attack a member of a large party, and they do not give up on their prey so easily.*

Princess Fianna shivered. "Such a graceless topic," she said.

"Did my ward ask for a reward or boon of some sort?" Jarlath asked.

"We offered. She turned us down," Prince Viggo said.

"Oh," Jarlath said, turning to scowl at Dylan.

Dylan shrugged, and her stomach growled loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Princess Fianna looked away, but Prince Viggo grinned at Dylan. King Rory, seemingly, had decided to ignore the noise.

Prince Callan's shoulders shook as he faced a wall. He cleared his throat and turned around, mirth just fading from his eyes. "It has grown rather late in the morning. I suppose it is time for lunch."

Dylan rewarded Callan with a large smile. *I believe it is. Thank you for receiving me, Your Majesties*.

"Of course. Thank you again, Miss Dylan," King Rory said as she opened the study door and edged into the hallway.

"If you are ever in need of aid, I hope you seek out Kingsgrace Castle," Jarlath said, unwilling to leave the royal family.

King Rory gave Jarlath a pained smile. "We thank you for the bravery of your ward," he said as his children filed out into the hallway. "Now if you would excuse us."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Jarlath said with another elaborate bow. King Rory shut his study door in the lord's face.

Dylan watched Jarlath with narrowed eyes. *I have to do something about him.*

Chapter 10
Regarding Borders

Nothing! Dylan scowled as she went through Jarlath's armoire for the second time. *No pelt; no secret plots.* Where was he hiding his things? She had already searched his bed—she had even ripped a hand-sized hole in his mattress to be certain he hadn't stuffed it there and had it sewn up—and all the drawers of his furniture.

This was the fourth time in almost two weeks Dylan had been able to wriggle away from Bump-and-Lump to search Jarlath's room. She had it down to an art, but it didn't do any good. She still knew nothing about why Jarlath and all those men in the camp worked with the sea witch, and she was no closer to finding her pelt than she was before.

Maybe his cronies are watching it. Dylan poked at one of the lord's waistcoats. She stood on a chair to check the top of the armoire again before plopping down at his desk and shuffling through his papers—nothing at all revealing or conspiracy-worthy amongst the lord's papers. Several maps had trading routes marked out, and a few sheets had men listed and numbered. Dylan paged through the papers again. *In the camp… Jarlath had a small army. How could he afford them and what were they doing? He wasn't in the trading business.*

So, why did he have so many maps?

Could he be the one organizing all the bandits and sending them out to ambush the traders?

Dylan drummed her fingers on the desk and considered the idea. It fit. Jarlath had to be profiting somehow, or he wouldn't be working with the sea witch. And Dylan had witnessed his exuberance for "acquiring" items, and his forest camp of men. A man who would stoop to blackmailing a selkie wouldn't hesitate to rob his fellow countrymen.

But surely he wasn't clever enough to be the ringleader. And besides, I don't have any proof. I can't expect Prince Callan to arrest Jarlath on my suspicions alone. I need something more—more than trading maps and a list of employees. I'll have to keep looking—for my pelt, and for evidence.

Dylan should have been ecstatic that she had finally realized Jarlath's angle, but instead she felt sad that the stocky lord had turned on his own country.

She tidied up the room before slipping out, locking the door, and pocketing the spare key. She struggled with her dress for a moment—aquamarine satin with gold embroidery and trim—then hefted her skirts and ran.

Dylan plotted as she ran, making the trek from the beachside wing to the main palace. It had been two weeks since Princess Nessa was attacked, and while Dylan had made marvelous progress, it wasn't enough. The hot summer sun beat down on her—attesting to how long she had been stranded on land—and she wasn't much closer to breaking free from the sea witch or Jarlath than she had been early in the season. But soon, she would be. The sea witch's rampage had to be stopped, and Jarlath needed to be taken care of.

When Dylan reached the main structure, she made her way to a little inlet that jutted inside the palace. She looked around to make sure no one was watching before she scaled the stone wall, climbing about four feet so she could heft herself through an open window. She hauled herself through the space and dropped back into the empty but elaborate bathroom she'd left minutes earlier. She glanced in the mirror so she could tug her hair straight and brush her wayward curls out of her face. Cagney had done up some of her hair that morning in an effort to further gentrify her, but Dylan wasn't sure it was worth the effort. Then, she opened the restroom door and strode out past the waiting Bump and Lump.

The pair probably thought Dylan had some sort of stomach disease due to the length of time she supposedly spent in there, but it was the one place she could ditch them knowing they would not dare follow.

Feeling sour with her newly learned knowledge, Dylan rejoined the royal activity for the day: sports. Or what passed for sports in Ringsted.

Selkies held races—on land and in water; fighting matches—also on land and in water; and contests to prove physical feats—not surprisingly, on land and in water. Ringsted nobles, it seemed, were strange in their taste for sports.

The men were allowed all the fun—entering in sword contests, wrestling contests, and archery tournaments. Certainly, a few women entered the archery tournaments as well—but it seemed "royal" sports

were more “refined.” Dylan thought “refined” must mean an exercise in futility.

The point of today’s “sport” was to take a small, feather encrusted ball, and to toss it back and forth, hitting it with a paddle of meshed wires. If one was a little more cut-throat about scoring points, Dylan could get behind such a sport, but it seemed that *ladies* refrained from keeping score at all, and instead tried to keep the ball in air as long as possible, tapping the ball as if it were a delicate flower.

The intense sun made the afternoon air stifling and sticky. Nestled against the palace in the gardens as they were, the cool ocean breeze could not reach them.

“Dylan, over here.” Cagney held out Dylan’s paddle. “Are you alright? You were gone so long.”

I’m fine; I was taking a break, she wrote before inspecting the snacks table—which had been refilled.

“I don’t blame you. It’s quite warm out here,” Cagney said, brushing the crisp skirts of her dress. Although some of the other noble ladies were wilting like fresh-cut flowers left in the sun, Cagney seemed as aglow as she had that morning. *Probably through sheer willpower*, Dylan thought, nibbling an egg tart.

“Do you want to play some more?” Cagney asked.

Dylan stared at her friend.

“Good. I can’t say I particularly love this game, either. Although Lord Dooley is quite fun to play with,” Cagney admitted as she dubiously studied her plate. When she looked up, Dylan caught her gaze and raised her eyebrows, making the young woman flush. “Because he is such a skilled player, not because I enjoy the senseless drabble he spouts.”

Naturally, Dylan wrote.

Cagney looked like she wanted to say more, but at that moment, Lord Dooley and Prince Callan sauntered over to them.

Prince Callan looked almost as fresh as Cagney. His black vest and white undershirt were crisp and wrinkle-free, although his face had the dewy look of one who had recently exerted himself. Lord Dooley, on the other hand, was a sopping mess. His clothes—a scarlet red undershirt with a brilliant orange vest—were dripping with water, and he sported a lily pad on one shoulder.

Cagney stared at her employer in horror. “What *happened*?”

“Callan made me do it,” Dooley said, squeezing water out of his brown curls.

Callan smiled pleasantly and shook his head.

“As if I would believe that for even a moment. What did you do?” Cagney folded her arms across her chest with a look of reproof.

“He cracked the birdie over my shoulder. I had to leap for it,” Dooley said.

“Into a *pond*?” Cagney said, her nose wrinkling as a puddle formed at his feet.

“Well, I couldn’t let the birdie drop, could I?” Dooley said, giving Cagney his best puppy look.

She stared at Dooley with narrowed eyes.

Dooley laughed nervously.

“Avert your eyes, Miss Dylan. Dooley is about to receive the biggest dressing down in his adult life,” Prince Callan suggested.

“Callan? Callan! Where are you?”

Prince Callan’s lips flattened, but otherwise his expression didn’t change. “Coming, Mother,” he called. “If you’ll excuse me. I’ll return later,” he said to his friends before heading in his mother’s direction.

Today, the queen sat in a great, gilded chair. Princess Nessa was present, although she didn’t look too happy about the arrangement as her mother was making her sit in a little chair next to her. Prince Viggo and Princess Fianna stood in attendance a short distance away.

Dylan tipped her head as she watched the royal children flock around their mother.

“I see Her Highness hasn’t gotten over the fright with Princess Nessa and the water horse,” Dooley said, coming to stand next to Dylan.

What do you mean?

“Queen Etain does this whenever something dangerous or life-threatening happens to one of her children,” Cagney said, joining them.

“You should have seen it when Callan and his crew were shipwrecked two years ago. Callan was thought to be drowned, but they found him on the beach, a long way from the wreck,” Dooley said, turning to look at Dylan.

Dylan nodded politely and kept her expression interested but placid as guilt prodded her like fish nibbling at her toes. *I probably shouldn’t have manhandled Prince Callan so badly when dragging him ashore. Next time I*

will conduct myself better—although if there is a next time with the prince, he probably deserves to get his head cracked on some rocks.

"The queen didn't let him out of her sight for months. She almost banned Prince Viggo from attending the wedding ceremony of Prince Cristoph and Princess Cinderella of Erlauf last winter—and he had three weather mages with him," Cagney added.

"She wasn't far off, though. Viggo's ship still had a rough time of it," Dooley said. "Those storms. They will break us if they don't dissipate in the next year. Even Mother and Father are worried."

"Yes," Cagney said, her gaze troubled.

Dylan's placid expression crumbled. *Bandits and trading—I should have seen the way the wind was blowing ages ago. After this is over Da will have to see about getting some eyes and ears on land. We wouldn't have been so blindsided if we knew the storms were affecting landers. That fiendish sea witch!*

"But there's no sense worrying over it. We cannot do anything to end the storms. We may as well enjoy ourselves this afternoon. Would you like to play a round with me, my dove?" Dooley asked.

"No. You are going to return to your room and change into something dry so you may be presentable," Cagney said.

"Must I?" Dooley asked. "If I stand in the sun long enough, I will dry."

"You have pond scum smeared on your back. You will change," Cagney said.

Dooley sighed. "Very well. As you insist, pearl of my soul." Dooley set aside his racquet before he started to walk off. "This is almost fortuitous. My fuchsia-colored breeches should be dry by now."

Cagney's face froze as her employer walked off. "Lord Dooley!" She lunged after him. "Excuse me, Miss Dylan. Lord *Dooley*!"

Dylan grinned and watched the pair duck through the gardens and disappear when they rounded the palace corner. Alone, she picked out a selection of snacks and found a stone bench to sit on while she ate. The bench gave her a beautiful view of the gardens and the nobles having varying degrees of success in hitting the feather-accented ball back and forth and, most importantly, Jarlath.

At the moment, the puffed-up toad was attempting to flirt with Lady Shauna. Dylan thought it would be unlikely his efforts would be rewarded,

based on the way his two friends leered at his back like bloodthirsty sharks.

Dylan leaned back and watched the lady slip out of Jarlath's grasp and return to her circle of friends. His companions came up on either side of him and slapped his shoulders, consoling him in another failure.

She grinned, cheered by her captor's loss, when a feminine voice interrupted her thoughts. "Are you enjoying yourself?" Lady Aisling had joined her, looking lovely in a gown of emerald green and unaffected by the persistent sun.

Dylan reached for her slate, but Lady Aisling continued. "That was a rhetorical question. Of course you are. The royal family is paying you special notice for saving Princess Nessa. Who wouldn't enjoy such marked attention? But I thought I would be friendly and tell you it is temporary."

Dylan studied the young lady for a minute before picking up on the stiffness in her back, and the tiny wrinkle between the lady's brows. *Ah,* Dylan thought. *She is upset by it.* Dylan rolled her shoulders back and ignored the young lady as she went back to watching Jarlath. *Should I stroll over and see what he and his friends are discussing? Judging by their gazes, though, I think it is Lady Shauna.*

"Perhaps not this week, or even the following week, but soon your gallant rescue of Princess Nessa will fade from their minds. The attention will stop, and the attraction will fall away," Lady Aisling continued. "Jarlath will return to Kingsgrace Castle, taking you with him. I, however, will remain at the Summer Palace with the royal family."

Yes, they are definitely still discussing Lady Shauna. For a man whose ally does a great deal of damage, Jarlath is disgustingly distracted, Dylan frowned.

"Do you hear me, Miss Dylan?" Lady Aisling asked.

Upon hearing her name, she looked up.

The beautiful lady bent over her, as if sharing a secret. "You are nothing. You mean nothing. Prince Callan is *mine,* no matter how you might divert him for the moment. I will be queen, and when I am, you can be certain you will never see Callan again."

Dylan raised her eyebrows at the proclaimed "most beautiful lady in Ringsted." She could not help but write out a response. *If that is true…why are you so angry? Are you worried your beauty can't win against someone who is nothing?*

Lady Aisling gaped at her.

Dylan smiled at the stunned lady briefly. Then she scooted down and stood. She strolled to the refreshments table, hearing a number of the mean girls who had previously insulted her gather at Lady Aisling's side.

They glared at her, but she caught sight of a tray of iced desserts that a servant carried. The girls—who resembled seagulls with their demanding, high pitched voices and propensity to gather *everywhere*—faded from thought as Dylan grew misty-eyed over the tray.

She took a dessert—some kind of mousse sprinkled with berries—and scooped into it. She silently hummed in delight when the taste of cold vanilla exploded in her mouth.

Refreshing, she thought with a smile. Some of the smile slipped off her face when she noticed Bump and Lump's steady gazes. Dylan scratched her neck and set her dessert aside. She grabbed two of the mousses and approached the men, holding them out.

The two guards looked at her as though she were offering them a live squid.

Dylan rolled her eyes and shoved the dishes beneath their noses.

Reluctantly, as if eating the dessert would be a painful experience, they took the dishes. Bump squinted at his before poking it. Lump rumbled, "Thank you," as he watched her with a wary eye.

Pleased with herself, Dylan rejoined the party to reclaim her dessert. She ate a second big spoonful and exhaled in sheer happiness.

"Ahem."

Dylan blinked, her food celebration interrupted, and glanced down at the voice.

A young, pleasant-looking man—a hand's length shorter than Dylan as most human men were—smiled up at her. "Good afternoon, Miss Dylan. If you will forgive my impertinence for introducing myself, I am Lord Eirnin of Seabreech Bay. I already know you are Miss Dylan, the ward of Lord Jarlath of Kingsgrace Castle." He reminded her a little of an otter—a cute, cuddly creature that looked perpetually happy.

She returned his smile and wrote, *It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Eirnin.*

"I heard how you saved Princess Nessa. That was very brave of you," he said.

Thank you, but I fear I went about it in a foolish and stupid way, Dylan confessed.

"No, no!" Lord Eirnin said, shaking his head. "No one was hurt, and you saved the princess's life! How could that be foolish?"

I approached the kelpie armed with rocks and a dagger.

"I think it was courageous of you."

I thank you for your kindness, Dylan wrote, her lips quirked in a smile.

"The way I hear it, you recognized the signs of the approaching kelpie."

Dylan nodded.

"It seems you are familiar with the ocean. Do you live near it?"

I live IN it, Dylan thought wryly before she nodded again.

"I love the sea," Eirnin admitted. "I don't have much of a mind for trading, but I will fool myself in thinking I make a jolly good sailor. The sea air and the volatile ocean, there's something enchanting about it."

It can be beautiful, but also very cruel, Dylan wrote. She shifted a little and glanced around. Although the conversation was perhaps the most enjoyable she ever had with a noble who was not Lord Dooley or Prince Callan, the air felt heavy. Like a storm about to rip open.

"Oh, aye," Eirnin nodded. "I've been on a wrecked ship a few times. Of course one of those occurrences, it was a little one-man sail boat, but even so. It was a dark storm. I was a fool to go out in it. Do you sail, Miss Dylan?"

I've never had the opportunity to.

Lord Eirnin brightened. "Perhaps, after all the festivities here are over, your guardian could be convinced to stop by Seabreech Bay? I would love to—"

"Eirnin, there you are," Prince Callan said, appearing behind the shorter lord. The prince wore his skin-deep smile, and he looked pleasant enough, but his voice was dark, like thunder. "Could I have a moment of your time?"

Lord Eirnin blinked before flashing his cheerful otter smile at the prince. "Of course, Your Highness, but I was just having a delightful conversation with Miss Dylan. We—"

"It won't take long," Prince Callan said, throwing an arm over Eirnin's shoulders and steering him away from her.

At their retreat, Dylan realized her dessert was starting to melt. She rushed to eat it, enjoying it before it could puddle into something unrecognizable.

"We have returned—although Cagney wouldn't let me wear my fuchsia breeches," Lord Dooley said with a gusty sigh.

Cagney said nothing, she just narrowed her eyes at the young lord.

"Where is Callan? I thought he would have broken away from his tether by now," Lord Dooley said.

He is talking to Lord Eirnin.

Cagney blinked. "Who?"

Lord Eirnin of Seabreech Bay? He was telling me about sailing when Callan insisted he needed to have a private discussion with him.

"Oooh. Lord *Eirnin*. Shorter fellow, a little plump, but happy?" Lord Dooley asked.

Dylan nodded.

"I'm not surprised. Callan should have spoken to him before the little fellow worked up the courage to talk to you. Would have saved the man some time," Lord Dooley said.

I don't understand.

"Prince Callan can be possessive," Lord Dooley said.

What?

"Oh look, here he comes," Cagney said in an effort to cut the conversation off.

Prince Callan and Lord Eirnin strolled side by side. The prince looked cheerful enough, but Lord Eirnin was white faced and a little dazed. Callan shook the young lord's hand. He bowed and tottered off, like a shipwrecked sailor just returned to land.

"Good to see you dried off again, Dooley," Callan said, smiling at his friend when he returned to the group.

What happened with Lord Eirnin? Dylan asked.

"I just needed a moment with him to remind him of Seabreech Bay's borders. As prince, I can't let men poach on other nobles' territory," Callan said with a smile. It was a different flavor of smile, one that was quite self-satisfied.

I don't get it, Dylan wrote.

"Did the poor man even *know* he was poaching?" Lord Dooley raised his eyebrows at his friend.

“He didn’t. Which is why I had just a kind word or two for him,” Prince Callan said. “But he knows now. I don’t expect any trouble in the future. He’s a good man.”

Dylan turned to Cagney, hoping for enlightenment.

“I am positive you don’t want to know,” Cagney said.

She accepted the answer and got one of the vanilla mousse treats. She presented it to Cagney and snapped up a second for herself. *Heaven,* was all she wrote before eating a bit of the treat.

“It is delicious,” Cagney admitted.

How do they make something cool in the summer?

“They bring in ice and snow from the Chronos Mountains and store it in bunkers built into the ground,” Cagney explained.

Dylan set her dessert down to write, *Ingenious.*

“It is one good thing about having such a big mountain range—even if it does cut off all possible land trading routes with other countries,” Prince Callan said before he picked up Dylan’s mousse and ate a spoonful of it.

She held out her hands for her dish. As soon as Prince Callan relinquished it, she went back to eating it.

“I agree,” Lord Dooley said. He noticed Cagney frowning at Prince Callan. “What?”

“I was just thinking, Your Highness, that if you talked to Lord Eirnin about…poaching, you should discuss your…borders with Lady Aisling.” Cagney’s sharp blue eyes settled heavily on Prince Callan.

Dylan finished her mousse and set the dish aside. *I thought that was the point of maps, to define territories. Aren’t your maps accurate?*

“They’re accurate. But sometimes an unexplored territory causes trouble,” Prince Callan said. “For instance, one doesn’t know if it’s filled with marshes and bogs or with rich forests and rivers.”

Dylan looked to Cagney, who bit her lip.

I have a feeling you are all making things far more complicated than they need to be, Dylan wrote.

“There is a good chance your words are right, Miss Dylan,” Lord Dooley said. “Now, would you like to try your hand at playing with me?”

Dylan gave him a look devoid of enthusiasm.

Dooley laughed. “The picture of fun, I tell you. Come on, when we’re finished we can take a picnic lunch at the ocean. I should like to favorably compare the pearl of my heart to all the stark beauty—”

“Mind your borders, Lord Dooley,” Cagney said.

Dooley gave her his mournful eyes. “But I’m trying to expand them.”

“Careful, or they will *shrink*,” Cagney promised.

Dylan shook her head.

“What?” Callan asked her.

Dylan hesitated a moment before writing out, *I’m glad I don’t own land.*

Callan started laughing so hard he had to sit on a bench to recover.

Days later, the oppressive silence and loneliness of sleeping alone drove Dylan from her bedroom around the midnight hour. She tucked her slate under her arm in case Bump and Lump followed. She’d need to explain herself. Feeling that food would not help her tonight, she forwent a trip to the kitchens and, instead, made her way to the beach.

There had been no sight or even hint of any ocean predators since the day Dylan saved Princess Nessa, and the shore was warm and soothing to her, embracing her like a favorite shawl as she sat on the still warm sand and watched the moonlight play on the water’s surface. The incoming and outgoing waves sounded a steady beat—their tiny white crests and white froth glowing in the moonlight. The reflected moonlight lit up the area like dusk.

Dylan propped her arms on her legs—which were pulled tight to her chest. *Home*, she thought, staring out at the welcoming ocean. *I want to go home. I want to dive in the ocean and see my sisters, and Ma, and Da.*

She drooped. *Maybe I should tell Prince Callan and Cagney and Dooley everything. But I* should *be able to do this! I am the youngest daughter of King Murron. I am the most gifted singer of the Ringsted selkies! Stopping an idiot like* Jarlath *should not be beyond my abilities.*

She sighed in frustration. Waves crashed, spraying the sandy shore with sea water. Giving into the ocean’s siren call, Dylan abandoned her writing materials, tied up her skirt—she was wearing her plain red gown from Jarlath—and waded in so the incoming waves hit her calf. She stretched upwards, flexing her fingers and toes, before doing an experimental twirl.

Since arriving at the Summer Palace, she hadn't danced like a selkie at all. Her muscles were cramping up from the lack of her usual activity. If she got up early enough, she was able to sneak in an ocean swim, but not a dance.

Dylan puttered around in the water before stringing together a few selkie dance moves—liquid twirls; wide, elegant hand gestures that mimicked seaweed swaying in the ocean currents; jumps, the way dolphins breached the surface; and hypnotic, rolling swirls.

She stopped once or twice to go swimming in the ocean, but the music from the previous week's party played in her head, and Dylan couldn't help but try to fix a selkie dance to the pretty music. She finished a twirl performed on one foot—the other jutting up behind her like a whale fin—when she caught sight of a man holding a lantern and standing on shore.

Dylan dropped her leg and stood awkwardly, blushing when she realized it was Prince Callan watching her.

"You're a beautiful dancer," the prince said.

Dylan let down her soaked skirts and shook her head. She made her way up the beach and reclaimed her slate and chalk from where she had abandoned them before her swim. *Not in my family. I am respectable enough, but not the best.*

"Just because you aren't the best doesn't mean your dancing isn't beautiful," Prince Callan said, sitting down on a large bolder, smooth with age. He patted a spot next to him, inviting Dylan to sit with him. "And it's interesting; I don't think I've ever seen you embarrassed."

Dylan wrinkled her nose at him. *That is because usually I do foolish things in privacy, or as spur of the moment, terrible decisions.*

Prince Callan laughed. "You are brash," he said before nodding at the ocean. "Do you miss your family?"

The way he said it, Dylan thought for a moment that he knew what she was. But the moment passed, and Dylan nodded.

"But you don't want to leave Jarlath?"

Dylan shook her head.

Prince Callan nodded and smiled at her.

Why do you do that?

"Do what?"

Hide behind a mask of pleasantry, Dylan wrote.

Prince Callan stared at her words for a few extra heartbeats. “What do you mean?” he asked.

It’s camouflage—not an honest expression. You put it on. Like boots.

A shadow of a real smile passed over Prince Callan’s lips, but he shifted his lantern so he could better look out over the ocean. “I’m not a good prince. Not really.”

Dylan waited for him to further elaborate. It took a minute of silence before he continued.

“I care for my subjects but in a broad perspective. I care about bandits attacking our land-trade routes and the typhoons halting overseas trade. Or in a good year, I care about crops and fishing, and our imports and exports. I want the citizens of Ringsted to be happy and prosperous.”

But? Dylan wrote, hearing it in his voice.

“But I don’t care to make personal connections,” Callan said, straightening up as if admitting so had taken a load of his back. “I don’t particularly want to be involved in my subjects’ lives, whether they are noble or commoner. It’s not that I see myself as being above them, or that I don’t think them worthy of notice, it’s just…not something I enjoy.

“I don’t even have the excuse of being scholarly. Oh, I like looking over new contracts and reviewing figures enough, but I don’t love books the way my father does. I have a few people that I care for and love particularly. Rather than learning the intimate details of a noble’s life, I would rather spend my time looking over the welfare of many. So I walk around smiling, hoping it will cover up the fact that I’m as unfriendly as a person can be,” Callan said.

Dylan mulled over Callan’s words, weighing them, interpreting them.

“I’m afraid for Ringsted. To have a king that doesn’t *like* people? I am not a good person,” Callan said, a wry smile twisting his lips.

Dylan tapped her slate, wondering what she could say to the prince. *As long as you don’t resent your role as future King, and you do right by your country, I think you could be the most crotchety ruler Ringsted has ever seen, and you could still be a good king.*

Callan looked away to stifle a chuckle, and Dylan had to smack his shoulder with her slate to get his attention.

Hear me. Cagney is not easily able to make female friendships. Does that make her a bad person?

“Of course not.”

And Lord Dooley. He is inept at wooing Cagney. Does that mean he doesn't really love her?

"No."

We all have strengths and weaknesses. That's what makes us interesting. If each person was the same, there would be no innovation. So you don't like people. What are the strengths you can play up instead?

Callan stared at Dylan.

Dylan was about to list a few of Callan's strengths for him—his loyalty, intelligence, and his incredible internal strength—when Callan placed a hand on her slate.

"What makes you so sure?"

Puzzled, she scratched her head.

"Why do you know it would be bad if we were all alike? It has become an epidemic for females your age to *try* to look and act exactly alike."

Dylan pursed her lips as she considered his question. She knew, of course, because she was a sea lion shifter in a family of seal selkies. She was so different from her family because she was an entirely different *animal*. But her family loved her anyway, even though she would have been considered lesser, and they rejoiced with her in some of her differences—like her great speed and superior flexibility.

I have always been different from my sisters, from my entire family, Dylan wrote. *But my parents taught me it is fun to be different. They never made me feel lesser because of what I could or could not do. They loved me because I am me—differences and similarities.*

When Dylan looked up, Callan was staring at her. He slowly raised his hand and combed it through her hair, his facial expression soft and gentle. "You are incredibly beautiful."

The comment threw her off a little, not because of the words—words were cheap, after all—but because of the way Callan looked when he said it. He wasn't smiling, and there was a brilliant, unreadable intensity in his hazel eyes, making the flecks of green and gold glow in the flickering lantern night.

No one had ever looked at Dylan like that before. No one.

Callan's expression took on pain. "Promise me I can trust you, Dylan," he said, grazing her cheekbone with the tip of his thumb.

She tilted her head. *I don't understand?*

“Promise me that I can trust you not to betray my trust and my affection for you,” Callan asked.

Dylan still didn’t understand what he meant. Why would he not trust her? She had never done anything to wrong him. In fact, she had saved him from drowning—and his sister from becoming a kelpie’s lunch! But something was upsetting the prince, so Dylan wrote, *You can always trust me, Your Highness.*

Callan nodded and, with great reluctance, removed his hand from Dylan’s cheek. She could practically feel the prince putting away his gentleness and tucking it behind a display of good humor.

“In four days, many of the nobles will be going to the wedding of Lord Padriac of Chronos’ Shadow. His holding is roughly an hour or two ride from the Summer Palace. He has a minor holding, but it’s a key backup position to the Summer Palace and at the base of the Chronos Mountains, so he is important to acknowledge. I was wondering if you would do me the honor of being my companion for the day. By companion, I mean, I would be your escort. You would spend the day with me.”

Will I be fed?

Callan grinned, his eyes twinkling with good humor. “Yes, there will be more food than even you can eat.”

Who else is going? If Jarlath was attending, she should stay behind to see if she could find where his guards were stationed and search their rooms.

“Viggo, Fianna, Dooley, Cagney, and about two dozen others. Many are staying behind—my mother and father included, as is your guardian. Lord Jarlath did not receive an invitation, I believe.”

For a moment Dylan warred with herself. She needed to make headway with finding her pelt. The baby otter was one of *many* casualties. The longer she frittered her time away, the more lives she wasted. But she liked the prince and enjoyed his company, and this would in all likelihood be the only time Dylan would be free in Ringsted without Jarlath leering over her shoulder—for he would never refuse the prince. Could she slip away and learn more about the trade routes and the bandits?

Chronos’ Shadow…I recall that holding on Jarlath’s map. If he thought it was important enough to mark, he might have some men nearby.

Her mind made up, Dylan nodded and wrote, *I would love to go.*

“Excellent. I look forward to it,” Callan said with a warm smile.

She nodded and sneezed.

“I believe that is our cue to return indoors. It isn’t common to get sick in the summer, I’m aware, but sea bathing in the middle of the night isn’t a wise plan to test the theory,” Callan said. He stood up and grabbed his lantern before offering his hand.

She took it and let the prince lead her back to the palace.

Chapter 11
Bandits

"Jarlath doesn't trade. His money is made off his land," Cagney said, as she and Dylan bounced along in the comfy royal carriage. "Kingsgrace is a smaller territory than it used to be—he has sold off parts to neighboring holdings, I think. He is ill mannered and not very popular in courts, so he is passed over for exclusive events. Are you sure you want me to go on?"

She nodded. Both Cagney and Dylan wore one of their new fine, beautiful dresses. Dylan was in a dress of bright green that made her unusual eyes a more forest color, and Cagney's gown was light blue with lace trim. (Cagney, Dylan noticed, was also wearing the pearl earrings Lord Dooley had bought her.)

"To be blunt, the royal family finds him almost offensive. He is known to be a quarrelsome neighbor, but at least he does not terribly mistreat his servants," Cagney said.

He certainly mistreats his "acquisitions," Dylan thought.

"He is a great drinker and pursues women far above him. Don't you know all of this already? You *are* his ward."

Dylan ignored her comment. *I already know he must be making money off the banditry, but how in the blazes is he profiting from these storms? He can't be selling the stolen goods in Ringsted—he would have been caught by now. His lands cannot be funding him, or he wouldn't sell them off. So where is his income coming from? Is the witch paying him?*

"I am glad you decided to come today," Cagney said after a few moments of silence.

Me, too, she wrote with a smile.

"Dylan…did it ever occur to you that Prince Callan might be *interested* in you?" Cagney asked.

Dylan shrugged. *No—although I consider him a good friend.*

"Why do you believe he doesn't harbor romantic feelings for you?"

He is engaged to Lady Aisling.

"But he isn't. Quite. Yet," Cagney said.

Dylan considered Cagney's words. She liked Prince Callan—and Cagney and Lord Dooley as well. But she couldn't give up the ocean for them. Besides, she had to find her pelt, and the sea witch had to be stopped.

For the first time, though, Dylan realized that if—no, when—she succeeded, she'd leave her new friends behind forever. She would never get a chance to witness another one of Dooley's flashy entrances, or Cagney's swift but fierce corrections. And Callan's rare but *true* smiles would be lost to her. *I'm going to miss them…*

A lady's shriek jarred her from her thoughts.

The carriage rolled to a stop, but outside, people shouted and screamed. Dylan peeled back a curtain, and an arrow struck the carriage door. Cagney flatted herself on the floor of the carriage, but Dylan would not simply hide. She popped the door open with a scowl and pushed herself out.

Bandits surrounded the festive procession. There were at least twenty-five of them—not quite outnumbering the royal party of thirty, although at least a dozen of the procession members were women who uselessly screamed or swooned. And all of the bandits were big and burly. Some had crossbows—aimed at the more youthful men of the party, like Callan, Viggo, and Dooley, who were all riding.

Bump and Lump, who rode surefooted mules, nudged their mounts forward closer to Dylan—they probably feared she would fling herself at the bandits as she had the kelpie.

"Well, lookie here—we done bagged us a royal," a bandit laughed, riding his ill-fed mount up to Prince Callan. Princess Fianna huddled behind him on a beautifully tacked up mare, glittering like a seashell in the sunlight—an unfortunate beacon.

"Everyone out of the carriages. Remove your jewels and valuables, and hand them to our nearest man," another bandit said as some of his dirty men walked forward with loaded crossbows and knocked on the other carriages.

Cagney crawled out of the carriage, joining Dylan behind Lump's mule.

"How did they know to find us here?" Cagney murmured as she removed her pearl earrings. "This isn't a trading route, and it's not used often enough to warrant bandits camping it."

Good question. Dylan tried peering over the round buttocks of Lump's mule, but the guard backed the animal up, blocking her sight. *It has to be Jarlath's maps. Was someone outside Ringsted directing him?*

Cagney gave her jewelry to their carriage driver to walk over to a bandit. *Someone should do something*, Dylan wrote.

"Like what? It's too risky. People die during bandit attacks like this. It is a miracle they haven't killed anyone yet," Cagney hissed.

Dylan realized the bandits were also shaking down the few servants who had come with the procession. Her shoulders heaved with anger. The carriage drivers, footmen, and maids were being forced to empty their pockets.

They're robbing the poor, too, Dylan wrote.

"Of course. They're *bandits*. That's what they do," Cagney whispered.

"You three, line up," said the lead bandit, indicating to Prince Callan, Prince Viggo, and Princess Fianna.

"We're to kill the princes and take the princess hostage, right?" one bandit asked another. Dylan swiveled and homed in on him.

"Yeh. There's s'posed to be a rich heir here, too—Lord Dooley. We're to take 'im hostage, too."

How could they know this? Unless…Jarlath was more than just a middle man? That sea-dog! He dared to order an ambush on the royal family. He has no honor at all! Dylan curled her fingers into fists, longing to punch the buffoon-lord in the neck.

"What about the rest of the party?"

The bandit grinned, showing off yellowed teeth. "Whatever we want—though there's got to be a few survivors to notify the king 'n queen."

If only I could sing, Dylan screamed internally. *These wastes of humanity and stinking cesspools of—*Dylan broke off when she recognized the bandit standing with the one giving orders.

It was one of the men at Jarlath's camp. She had thrown him into the tent using water when she woke up without her pelt.

Proof! I have proof of Jarlath's activities staring at me right now! Someone should do something or…not. Dylan looked at Bump and Lump. Both were squinting at their fellow bandits, their posture stiff and watchful. When Dylan swiveled—searching the area—she spotted a handful of other bandits she recognized.

No. I am finished with this silly hold up. I am finished with waiting. I am finished with being powerless. Enough!

Cagney was starting to shake, but Dylan tugged hard on her arm. *Can you sing?* she wrote.

"Y-yes," Cagney said, her voice barely above a whisper.

When I signal like this, stand behind me and sing. Just hold one *note,* Dylan wrote, *but make it strong.* She turned to wiggle her hand behind her back in an example of the gesture.

"What are you going to do?" Cagney asked.

Stop this. Come, Dylan wrote before she shoved the slate at her friend. She edged out from behind Lump's mule. Her guards seemed to realize she was planning something stupid, because both Bump and Lump dismounted and moved to block her.

Their movements brought the bandits' attention to them. Dylan dodged the burly men and scurried away. She met the gaze of the bandit she knew and strode straight toward him, giving him the most intense, wild look she could muster. Her eyes watered, but she held his gaze.

The bandit's shoulders started moving up and down twice and fast as his breathing increased. He turned and whispered into the lead bandit's ear. She adjusted her path and swooped towards Callan and Fianna when Lump almost managed to grab her. Cagney tripped and almost fell, but Bump corrected her as they stampeded after Dylan, having gained the attention of everyone present with their actions.

"So? She can't do nuthin'. She's mute," the leader said.

In spite of his confident words, a few other bandits nervously edged towards the forest, hefting bags of loot.

"Hey, you there! Stop!" a bandit with a bow barked.

Dylan gave him a withering glare and ducked Lump's meaty hand when he reached for her again.

"Hey!" the bandit tried again, but she ignored him and reached the royal siblings. She shifted her gaze back to the petrified bandit, who gaped at her with horror. Dylan thrust her hand toward the nearby forest, warning them to get away while they still could.

They understood.

"Dylan, what are you d-doing?" Cagney whispered, her voice cracking with fear as she clutched Dylan's slate to her chest.

Bump placed a hand on Dylan's shoulder to draw her backwards, behind him, but she broke free and shook her head. *No, I have to end this.*

The smaller guard narrowed his eyes. He snapped his head in a nod and looked at Lump, shrugging his shoulders.

Lump sighed and said, "Sun-crazed sea lass," before he moved with Bump to stand next to Dylan. He cracked his knuckles, resembling a small giant as his eyes swept the bandits.

Is he threatening them?

Dylan didn't have time to ponder the matter. A shout shattered her thoughts.

A nobleman bludgeoned a bandit upside the head with a sheathed sword.

"Don't move! We'll kill you all," the lead bandit roared.

Dylan gave the bandit a toothy, predator-like smile she had frequently seen on sharks.

She heard a scrape. Bump slid three daggers out of scabbards and held them elegantly between his fingers. Cagney hovered behind him, her face white with fright.

And now Bump threatens them as well? Whose side are they on—surely not mine? Unless…had giving them food made them imprint upon me like newly hatched ducklings?

Other men from the party moved towards the bandits. *That's it! If we move together they'll back down. Drive them away!* Dylan pointed to the forest again.

"You don't scare us none." The leader lifted his sword so it was a hand's length from Dylan's face. "You're mute now."

Dylan opened her mouth and wriggled her fingers. Cagney, directly behind her, sang and held a note—her voice wobbly with fright.

While it was obvious to Dylan the song wasn't coming from her, it was enough to terrify the assistant bandit, who grabbed his leader and hauled him into the forest. "We've got enough loot. *Run*."

The bandits shouted—releasing a couple of arrows as they fled. They nicked two men, but all others missed their targets.

"After them!" Prince Viggo shouted, lurching to his feet.

"No." Prince Callan grabbed his brother by the arm. "We have to return home. If they have reinforcements nearby, we will be skewered. Fianna, into the carriage with Dylan and Cagney. Put the injured in one carriage,

ladies in the others. Cast off whatever you can. We travel light and *fast*," Prince Callan said.

He swiveled and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Are you alright?" Dylan nodded in shock.

Callan wrapped his arms around her in a quick but intense embrace before he briskly moved away. He pointed at a hysterical woman, shrieking incessantly. "Gag her, if you must, and load her into the carriage. We move. Now!"

"Miss Dylan," Lump said, looming over her like a mountain side. Next to him, Bump looked like a grim soldier.

Dylan offered them a smile.

Bump sourly pointed in the direction of the royal carriage.

"Come on, Dylan," Cagney said, already leading Princess Fianna. Dylan reluctantly followed her, climbing in behind the princess.

She thought another woman or two might be stuffed inside with them, but apparently there was enough room in the other carriages, for no one joined them.

Princess Fianna was as white as milkfish, and her eyes were as big as moons.

"It's alright, princess; you're safe," Cagney murmured, returning Dylan's slate to her.

Dylan ignored the stiff girl and wrote out to Cagney, *King Rory mentioned banditry is a problem?*

"Organized banditry, yes," Cagney said, distracted with the princess. "We have always had problems with the occasional gang of highway men, but ever since trading stopped, it has grown to be a huge problem. They're crawling over the countryside, and they seem to know all our trade routes. They've also attacked parties—like ours today—on less-traveled roads. No one knows how they do it."

Dylan did. It had to be Jarlath. *But how does he communicate with them? Those maps I saw only had trade routes marked out. There were no orders. I didn't think a few maps would be so important. If I were to find them again and give them to Prince Callan, could he arrest Jarlath? Did I make a mistake by not stealing them?*

Dylan thought Cagney might have a question or two of her own—like why the bandits had recognized her and run away after Dylan pretended to *sing*. But if the questions occurred to Cagney, she held her peace, and spent

the majority of the ride back in silence or attempting to sooth the upset princess.

That suited Dylan fine. She spent her time seething over her "guardian," and wondering how she could pin him down and pick him apart.

It was late in the evening before Callan and Dooley had a chance to speak about the day's events, the bandits, and, in particular, the girls they fancied.

"Today reminded me why I'm a merchant, and not some tom-foolery hero," Dooley said, plopping down in a cushy settee.

Callan waited to speak until a servant placed a tray of drinks on a sideboard and left, leaving the two men alone in Callan's private study. "You're a merchant because you have the head for it."

"Yes, and the heart of a field mouse," Dooley said, taking the goblet Callan handed him. "I couldn't have moved if I wanted to. I was paralyzed with fear, and I don't mind admitting it."

"You would have moved if they threatened Cagney," Callan said, taking care to enjoy his wine. It was an expensive import that Ringsted no longer had access to, thanks to the storms.

"Perhaps, yes. But they didn't," Dooley said, studying his goblet with a frown. "Your Dylan, though. That girl has the heart of a lion. *I* just about screamed in fright on her behalf when that bandit poked his sword at her face."

"Yes," Callan said, tracing the rim of his goblet with his thumb.

Dooley recognized the thoughtful pitch to Callan's voice and twisted on the settee to better see his friend. "What is it?"

"Some of the bandits recognized her," Callan said.

Dooley rolled his eyes and draped his frame back over the settee, propping his feet up on the cushions. "That doesn't mean anything, Cal. In case you missed it: they knew her, and they were *terrified* of her."

"Perhaps they were terrified of what Jarlath would do if he found out they hurt her," Callan said, leaning against the sideboard. "I still can't let myself trust her blindly, Dooley. There is too much she's not telling."

“She saved us, didn’t she? Or at least she gave us the edge we needed to shake them off. I stand by what I’ve always said: she’s not with Jarlath by choice.”

“Then we must be missing something. And we aren’t likely to find out what as she won’t tell me what sort of shadow game she’s involved in.” Callan took another sip of his wine.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Dylan isn’t your typical noble lady,” Dooley said, his voice wry. “She chased after a kelpie with nothing but rocks and a dagger and faced down bandits without any kind of weapon. Do you *really* think such a brash girl would willingly ask for help? Do you think Dylan—who listens to girls insult her as if they are discussing the market prices of barley and brushes them off like an empress, who didn’t care that she had two plain dresses to wear to a number of royal events, who has now saved the skins of one or more of the Ringsted royal children three times—that Dylan would waltz up to a man she’s known for less than a season and ask him to save her?”

Callan rubbed his chin. “When you say it like that, I feel like an idiot for even wondering.”

“If you want in on whatever trouble she’s a part of, you’ll have to be proactive and catch her in the act, laddy. Because that headstrong lady will never seek your aid. You should have thought twice before you started sighing over her like a sailor at sea thinking of his lady love.” Dooley raised his goblet in the air and finished off his drink.

“I’ve tried catching her. She’s gone before I even know she’s up to something,” Callan said.

“And then when you *do* find her, you drag her back to whatever awful party we’ve been forced to attend like she’s a misbehaving puppy. Stop being such a stick. It makes you seem suspicious and untrusting, which I have on good authority are considered large turn-offs,” Dooley advised.

“I *am* suspicious and untrusting.”

“Are you? Or are you just a pessimist?” Dooley asked.

“What do you mean?”

Dooley almost rolled off the settee in his eagerness to face his friend. “You’re not suspicious and untrusting of everyone. You just have a hard time swallowing that Miss Dylan is chained to Lord Jarlath. Is it because you’re afraid that the one lady you would allow past all your walls and secret prickliness will not return your affection?”

Callan rubbed his face. “You’re delving too deep for me to follow, again. Let’s concentrate on the problem.”

“Which is?”

“Can I trust Dylan or not?”

“I thought you asked her.”

“I did.”

“And what did she say?”

“That I could.”

“There you have it.”

“But what if she was lying?”

“By the sea and her beauty—fine. We’re going to try a fun exercise, Cal. Place your hand over your heart.”

Callan stared at his friend with an expression that said he wasn’t impressed.

“Do it.”

Callan did no such thing.

Dooley abandoned his goblet, popped up from the settee, stalked across the room, and placed Callan’s hand over his heart for him. “Now ask yourself, can I trust Dylan?”

Callan stared at his friend.

“If you don’t say it out loud, I’m going to tell your royal mother—”

“Can I trust Dylan?” Callan repeated, his voice short and emotionless.

“Now listen to your heart,” Dooley said, releasing Callan before walking back to his settee.

“I don’t hear anything,” Callan said.

“That’s because you *haven’t* a heart!” Dooley grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“I want to trust her. I believe I can trust her. But what if I’m wrong? The whole country will pay for the weakness of my heart,” Callan said.

“Cal. The girl saved you from drowning two years ago and saved you today from bandits. If she had dastardly designs, she would have let you drown in the shipwreck,” Dooley said.

“You’re right,” Callan said.

“Of course I’m right,” Dooley said.

“It’s close to what I was thinking as well, but I wanted to hear someone confirm it,” Callan said.

“You mean to say this whole time you had already decided you were going to trust Dylan, you just wanted to hear me say it too?” Dooley asked, peering across the room at his friend.

“More or less.”

“I should slap you for getting me so worked up, but instead I think I will preen in the knowledge that my opinion matters so much to you.” Dooley folded his arms behind his head to cushion his skull.

“What shall we discuss for the rest of the evening?” Callan asked, sipping his wine again.

“Whatever you wish.”

“In that case, I suggest your lack of development with Cagney.”

Dooley jutted out his lower lip in a pout. “Stop picking on me,” he muttered, turning to smash his face into the cushioned back support of the settee.

Callan laughed. “Personally? I think she’s softening.”

“She is not,” Dooley said, his voice muffled by the couch cushion.

“She wore the pearls you bought her.”

“And then bandits stole them.”

“That is hardly her fault.”

“No, it’s just a reflection of my luck with her,” Dooley said. He sighed before popping upright and facing Callan. “Do you know, I don’t think she takes it seriously.”

“That is a byproduct of smothering her with your love without acting solemn,” Callan said.

“If I acted solemn, she would immediately quit and seek a post in a far off land.” Dooley frowned.

Callan crossed the room to retrieve Dooley’s goblet and refill it. “I know,” he said, carrying his goblet as well as Dooley’s to the settee. He plopped down in a nearby armchair and handed the merchant heir his cup. “It’s who we’ve fallen in love with. To a brash, headstrong lady, and to a smart, business-hearted woman,” Callan said, holding his goblet up.

Dooley tapped his cup against Callan’s. “Hear, hear,” he said before taking a swig. “How did your parents take your refusal of the marriage proposal to Lady Aisling?”

Callan stared at his goblet. “If we’re going to talk about *that*, I will need another bottle of wine.”

“That badly, eh?”

“Father wasn’t surprised, and he didn’t care very much. Mother, on the other hand…”

“Lady Aisling took care to cozy up and become a favorite of your mothers. She’s a sharp girl. Shrewish, but sharp,” Dooley said.

“Mother hasn’t accepted it yet, but it doesn’t matter. I have officially refused,” Callan said, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

“Any news regarding Jarlath, Teige, or Doyle?”

“None. I thought having Jarlath in the castle would make it easier to keep an eye on him, but my men have turned up nothing. He spends the majority of his time failing to be a womanizer and consuming alcohol.”

“Classy,” Dooley said.

“Undoubtedly.”

“If we’re lucky, maybe Dylan will learn something and bring it to us,” Dooley said.

“I wouldn’t count on it, but it is a touching thought,” Callan said.

“I think that deserves another toast. To your ocean flower and the gem of my heart,” Dooley said.

“It’s a wonder Cagney hasn’t clubbed you yet,” Callan said, but he raised his glass again, and the two friends tapped goblets.

“To our bright future,” Dooley said.

“Or to our ruin.”

“You’re such a warm spot of sunshine.”

“Thank you. I work hard for that image.”

“I imagine so.”

Dylan had two baskets—one for each hand—which she happily swung as she walked the perimeter of the beachside palace wing—Bump and Lump trailing her. One was full of a large pile of cooked shrimp, the other had a few rolls in it. She intended to have a picnic snack by the ocean to console herself—she had successfully broken into Jarlath’s quarters but the maps, unfortunately, were nowhere to be found—and was looking for one of the paths down to the beach. Aiming for the one that curled off by the royal rooms—the one Callan had showed her when taking her to the royal breakfast weeks ago—she realized the doors to King Rory’s personal

library were open. Prince Callan and Queen Etain were there, arguing. Loudly.

"She is a good choice, Callan."

"It doesn't matter. It's my decision to make, and I have chosen *not* to pursue Lady Aisling," Prince Callan said.

"But she's perfect! She is beautiful and well-mannered. She comes from a good family, but not from too much money. She is intelligent and thoughtful."

"Repeating what *you* see as her strengths will not move me, Mother. My mind is made up."

"And you couldn't have made up your mind sooner? Before this winter, perhaps?" Queen Etain asked.

There was icy silence.

"I have no quarrel with Miss Dylan," the queen said. "I am forever indebted to her for the lives of my children. *But*! You cannot allow yourself to be so easily swayed, Callan. You will bring the country to ruin if you are always changing and adjusting your actions to mirror your wants and desires."

"Enough! I will not marry Lady Aisling; I have never *wanted* to marry her, and any distinction was given from you alone. You should have taken my desires into account before you welcomed her attention so thoroughly on my behalf." Callan's voice was sharp as he deliberately turned his back to his mother.

Dylan watched Callan storm down the wooden boardwalk, his shoulders and neck stiff.

She peeked forward, but the queen was already gone, the library door closing behind her. So Dylan picked her way down the boardwalk, watching the angered prince stalk onto the beach.

Bump and Lump waited at the boardwalk, keeping Dylan in sight, but giving the angered prince a wide berth. Dylan fished out a roll from her baskets and gave one to each guard before turning her attention to the pacing prince.

Dylan joined him, bouncing one of her baskets against her saffron skirt to alert Callan to her presence.

"I apologize, but I'm terrible company right now, Dylan," he said, staring out at the ocean.

She tipped forward to see his face and quickly leaned back, her eyes wide. She had never seen Callan so angry. He didn't look murderous—like Maureen whenever she walked into whatever prank Murphy set up—or full of rage—like her father when he learned of the newest stupid thing she had done. Instead, his face and eyes were empty and cold—like icebergs that could shatter a ship.

Deciding it was in her best interests not to push the prince further, Dylan clambered onto the smooth rocks that were commonly used as seats and opened up her baskets. As she munched on shrimp and rolls, Callan paced up and down the beach.

She had worked her way through about half the shrimp and three rolls when Callan gave up pacing and joined her on the rocks.

"Thank you." Callan took the roll Dylan offered. He took a bite out of it and stared out at the ocean, his expression still alarmingly blank.

Do you wish to discuss what is bothering you? Dylan asked via her slate.

"It is nothing," Callan said.

She raised her eyebrows at the prince.

"There was a girl my parents wished for me to marry," Callan said.

Lady Aisling?

"Yes," Callan said, looking down at his uneaten roll. "And I have refused the marriage proposal."

So your parents are angry?

"My mother liked Lady Aisling."

And her anger…angers you?

"Not quite. It's because she is right."

Dylan popped a shrimp in her mouth and lowered her eyebrows as she tried to puzzle through his answer.

"Part of Mother's argument is that I showed quite a bit of favor to Lady Aisling over the winter months. She is angry with me because if I intended to refuse Lady Aisling, I shouldn't have singled her out."

Oh. There wasn't much else Dylan could say to that. Queen Etain had a point. It was cruel of Callan to mislead Lady Aisling.

"Of course, no one could say that I behaved like a love-sick puppy over Aisling. All I did was escort her to a number of parties and events—so I could silence Mother's harping. But I cannot be mad for her henpecking me into it. I could have refused then, and I should have, for even then there

was someone else. So, I'm angry with myself for allowing my mother to push me into the situation. But I will not marry Aisling just for the sake of being a gentleman."

I see, Dylan wrote. She hesitated and studied him for a moment. She wanted to know, she really did. But did she dare ask? …*Someone else?* she finally wrote.

Callan's eyes softened when he saw her slate. "Yes. Two years ago, I met an enchanting girl, and, in spite of my best efforts, I've never been able to get her out of my mind."

Dylan frowned down at her slate, irritated when her lungs twisted oddly in her chest. *I am not jealous*, she thought.

"I wasn't in love with her when Mother first tried pushing me at Lady Aisling, but I am now. And I'm not going to give her up, even if it makes me a cruel man." Callan's eyes locked on her with an uncomfortable intensity.

Who is she? Dylan wrote, trying to remember if, in the beautiful swirl of parties and royal events, there was a lady Callan paid particular attention to. It couldn't be Cagney—Dooley would have hidden her in the Chronos Mountains if it was. But who else did Callan spend his time with? He couldn't mean *her*.

"The girl who saved me two years ago when my ship went down with the first unnatural storms that hit Ringsted."

For a moment, life froze for Dylan. Her heart stopped beating; her lungs wouldn't work; no thoughts darted through her mind. Only Callan's words existed, echoing in her ears.

Her. He was talking about her! But that was impossible! Dylan had struggled so terrifically to save him *because* he was unconscious. Dylan recalled her brief, flickering memory of saving him—as she hadn't cared much about him at the time, she hadn't taken great pains to remember, but she remembered enough. Callan hadn't woken up. He opened his eyes several times, but he was unresponsive. It wasn't until the search party found him that —oh. *That* girl…

Dylan's mind stopped racing. *The girl leading the search party.* Disappointment hit Dylan like a tidal wave, shocking Dylan further. *Why am I disappointed? I don't love Prince Callan. I still wouldn't leave the sea to be with him. But…but this is as painful as walking on shattered glass.*

Dylan looked up at Callan, who watched her with glittering eyes.

A search party found you, she finally wrote.

"Yes," Callan agreed, looking out to the ocean. "But *she* saved me."

Callan said nothing more, and Dylan was unwilling to push the topic. She sat next to Callan, miserable and no longer hungry. They watched the sun play on the waves, the heat of the sun making them sweat. Returning to the ocean would be terribly painful. This wasn't like the time she saved Callan after his ship went down. She *knew* him, she laughed with him—and Dooley and Cagney. They had gone shopping, eaten meals, and attended parties together. And while she missed her family and her agile sea lion body, she knew when this was all over she was going to miss Dooley, Cagney, and especially Callan. She wouldn't be able to visit them—she was a selkie, after all. She was going to lose them. Her chest ached with the thought, and the salt that stung her eyes wasn't just from the ocean air.

We should go inside, she wrote after half an hour passed.

"What, are you hungry for lunch?" Callan asked.

Dylan smiled but couldn't come up with a response. She felt sick to her stomach.

"Very well. But before we go in, I have something to ask of you," Callan said. "As you may or may not be aware, given your lack of interest in social events, the Summer Ball is in two days. Would you do me the honor of being your escort for the night?"

She hesitated. She considered asking Callan why he wasn't asking the girl from the search party, but Callan continued. "It's considered the culmination of our summer party season. After this, most of the lords and ladies will return home. Father and I will return to Glenglassera, although Mother will remain here with Fianna, Viggo, and Nessa for the rest of the summer."

Dylan licked her lips.

"Please? I would like to take you to this ball," Callan said, leaning close.

For the first time since her acquaintance with the prince, perhaps for the first time *ever*, she felt aware and *nervous* of Callan's close proximity. She, who embraced exchanges of affection, was *nervous*!

Yes, she finally wrote.

"Thank you. I fear you will find me high-handed, but I already had a dress ordered for you. You, Cagney, Dooley, and I are to go claim it from

Easky tomorrow afternoon," Callan said, tucking a strand of her bouncy hair behind her ears.

You didn't need to, she started to write, but Callan laid his hand on top of the slate.

"I wanted to," he said, smiling at her.

Dylan returned the gesture, feeling a little giddy.

"Now, we can go in. I imagine your stomach will soon be growling," Callan said, picking up the basket of shrimp with surprise. "Even if you didn't finish your snack."

Dylan picked up the basket of rolls and brushed her dress off. When Callan held out his hand, she hesitated for a moment. *He's not mine, and I belong to the sea,* Dylan reminded herself. Even so, she reached out and took Callan's hand and let the prince lead her back to the castle.

Chapter 12
The Summer Ball

"I thought we could look in at our dresses, observe their styles, and then search for proper hair ornaments. You *must* put your hair up for a ball, Dylan. It is not optional." Cagney studied her list as Dylan ate a fried fish her friend had bought her. "That way, we won't have to haul our dresses around."

Dylan nodded and picked a bone sliver out of her fish.

"And while we're in the area, we can check on the price of baskets and barrels," the trade-minded lady said.

Sure, Dylan agreed, sitting on the lip of the fountain in Easky. *Cagney?*

"Yes?"

Dylan scratched the side of her head with her free hand, getting chalk powder in her hair. She had been thinking for a while that her search methods for information on Jarlath were faulty. She didn't know if it was because she didn't think like a human—much less an idiot like Jarlath—or if it was because her methods were wrong. But Dylan couldn't afford to wait any longer. She wouldn't ask for help outright, but she needed advice.

Dylan slipped off the fountain lip and threw away the skewer her grilled fish had been impaled on. She tried to judge the distance between Cagney and Bump and Lump. The pair was standing far back, watching the villagers, and they continued to puzzle her.

If Dylan didn't know any better, she would think they were watching for that pickpocket. But no, they were here to make sure she didn't betray Jarlath. Thankfully, though, they were far enough away that they wouldn't hear much—if anything—Cagney said over the din of village life. *If you were a visiting lord at the Summer Palace, where would you store your important possessions?* Dylan finally wrote.

"Like jewels?" Cagney asked as they meandered towards the seamstress's shop.

Yes.

"There is a vault in the Summer Palace, but most don't bother to store their valuables there, unless it is a gift for the king or queen or something.

Some bring their own strong boxes—trunks with locks on them—to store their valuables. Many, though, do nothing. It is the Summer Palace. It is well guarded, and the royal servants are trustworthy. They leave their things in their room with the door locked."

Dylan frowned. That didn't help her at all. Jarlath *didn't* keep his things out in the open. Before she was able to inquire further, Cagney opened the door to the shop and stepped inside.

The seamstress smiled. "I was wondering when you two would arrive. They're all ready," she said, drawing a curtain away from a corner of her store, revealing two dresses displayed on stands.

Instantly, Dylan knew which dress was hers.

It had a square neckline, and its sleeves were thin and wispy, layered like waves and cutting off just below the shoulder. It was lighter and more liquid than Cagney's dress, and best of all, it was made with sea-glass green-blue silk. Gold embroidery trimmed the neckline and the hem of the dress, as well as the layered skirts. A thin belt made with gold links and polished sea glass hung from the waist, and there was a gold necklace from which a rock of sea glass, cut to resemble a flower, hung.

Dylan reverently reached out and touched her dress, awed and touched by the details that had gone into the gown.

"They're beautiful," Cagney said, turning to the seamstress. The beautiful blue brocade of her dress matched Cagney's eyes. It was in Loire style, and it possessed wider skirts than she usually wore. It was trimmed with white lace and had pearls sewn into the skirts.

"The men were very particular about how they wanted the dresses to look." The seamstress chuckled.

"Can we return for them? We would like to keep shopping a bit."

"Of course! Enjoy your time, ladies. When the ball comes, you will be the most beautiful girls there!" Cagney thanked the seamstress again and pulled Dylan out of the store.

"Once again Dooley went above what the situation calls for. I think he spends more on clothes for me than I'm actually *paid*," Cagney grumbled.

But it is a beautiful dress, Dylan wrote.

"It is. I think I can use the pearl hair pins Dooley bought me," Cagney decided.

Oh? So you kept them? Dylan wrote.

Cagney ignored the question. “It’s too bad those bandits took the earrings.”

You could always ask for a new pair. I’m certain Dooley would happily oblige you.

Cagney didn’t seem to read Dylan’s slate, but Dylan didn’t miss the way a muscle in her cheek twitched “But I think we could get a nice pair of gold combs for you. Callan gave me money before we left, so we needn’t worry about cost.”

Why didn’t he and Dooley come with us anyway? When he told me about the dress, he said they would be coming, Dylan wrote.

“Yes. Well, Dooley didn’t finish his work on time, so I banished him from coming.”

And Callan?

“As the eldest prince, being that he is young and somewhat eligible, Callan shouldn’t be seen escorting two women around in Easky without another male.”

Really? He has been alone with me multiple times in the palace.

“Yes, but in public it is different. He has a reputation to uphold.”

I don’t get it.

“The base explanation is Callan couldn’t come. But believe me. He wanted to be here, and he is *not* happy with Lord Dooley for failing to finish his work.”

Dooley winced from the safety of his desk. Even though Callan’s back was to him, he could see the black cloud of anger mounding around the prince with every movement.

“I imagine the girls have seen their dresses by now,” Dooley said, looking down at the paperwork Cagney wanted him to finish. “I hope the pearl of my heart likes her dress. I don’t see how your ocean flower could fail to love hers.”

ZING!

Dooley jumped when Callan tossed a dagger backwards without turning to look, and it embedded itself in the wall a foot from Dooley’s head.

Dooley sank lower in his chair to make himself a smaller target and wisely silenced himself.

As Dylan and Cagney searched for appropriate hair accessories, Dylan renewed the previous line of conversation. *Where would an idiot store his important possessions in the Summer Palace?* she wrote.

Cagney released a short bark of laughter at Dylan's question before guiltily looking around. "It's hard to predict where a person would stow valuables. I would say try to think about that person. Where do they feel safest? Where do they usually put the things they treasure? Sometimes people don't bring valuables with them on trips."

Dylan stopped cold.

She was right. Jarlath was a true idiot, and he hadn't expected to stay in the Summer Palace for weeks. Seeing how obsessed he was with magic, chances were he stored her pelt in his treasury before they left. It would fit his personality. Who else would capture a kelpie and store it underground?

But what about proof of his banditry? He had to be organizing the bandits, or at least outfitting them. They had been gone for well over a month. The bandits would have needed supplies well before now. Someone must have brought reports and lists to Jarlath. But where would he keep *that* information?

Cagney stopped at an outdoor stall and looked over several jeweled combs. "Hold still," she told Dylan, turning her so she could hold the combs against Dylan's hair. "These might match, but they are studded with emeralds. It would be better if we could find something with sea glass on it, but sea glass isn't usually paired with gold—since it's a common stone. Callan had your belt and necklace specially made," Cagney explained, towing Dylan to the next stand.

How many lords and ladies have brought guards to the Summer Palace? Dylan asked. She turned around to consider Bump and Lump.

"A few. Usually they just bring a dozen soldiers to act as an armed escort. But with all the banditry, quite a few of the trading lords brought personal guards who stay with them in the palace," Cagney said, eyeing an ivory comb.

Dylan nodded and watched her large, intimidating guards. They were still farther behind her than usual. Lump—the big guard—watched Dylan, but Bump was glaring at anyone who tarried too long near them.

Cagney said I should think about what Jarlath does with the things he treasures. He puts them in a dungeon in the ground. But he can't do that with papers—just like he can't do that with me at the Summer Palace. Instead he assigned me guards who cling like barnacles. Could it be…all his important papers are with other personal guards? Many more men than Bump and Lump had ridden with them to the Summer Palace, and they hadn't left…but she hadn't seen them with Jarlath either.

"This is it," Cagney said. "These would be perfect, if only they were gold." She held up two bronze combs, the tops of which had stones of sea glass polished and arranged in patterns.

Wouldn't the bronze blend in with my hair? Dylan asked.

"Perhaps. Let's see," Cagney brushed Dylan's hair to the side and slid a comb in to push the hair back. "You're right. The bronze of the combs matches your…er…lighter top layers. You can't see the combs, just the sea glass."

My sun-bleached hair does look orangey-bronze, Dylan acknowledged for Cagney's embarrassment.

"It looks marvelous; we'll purchase all four of them. That will give you plenty to work with," Cagney decided. She slid her coin purse off her belt and made the purchase from the grateful vendor. "I believe we are both set for tomorrow's ball. What next?"

Barrel prices? Dylan suggested.

Cagney flashed Dylan a wide smile. "Thank you. I'll buy you a donut to keep you occupied."

A what?

"A donut—a fried pastry? Good lord, we must get you one immediately. Come along." Dylan trailed after her shorter friend, glancing over her shoulder at Bump and Lump. They so easily blended in, she often forgot they were there. Perhaps Jarlath wasn't so witless after all. It would explain how he managed to mastermind his banditry ring. He hired professionals.

Dylan nudged her hair comb, checking it was secure. Cagney had arrived—dressed for the ball—and finished her hair not five minutes ago. She used the combs to push Dylan's hair away from her face and secure it at the back of her head, letting it spill down her back. A few shorter, kinked curls framed her face. Dylan thought the hairstyle was pretty, but she was awed the way Cagney had piled her own beautiful hair on the top of her head and secured it with her pearl pins.

Dooley is going to die of happiness, Dylan thought as she studied her reflection and smiled at her dress, necklace, and belt. *Not only is Cagney wearing the things he gave her, but he tricked her into letting him escort her.*

Dylan's thoughts were interrupted by a knock at her door. Dylan took one last glance in the mirror, grabbed her slate, and opened her door.

Callan wore a white waistcoat and pants with black boots and a black vest. When he saw Dylan, his smile was small, but the warmth in his eyes made her want to shrink. She didn't deserve to be looked at like that, not when she was failing so badly with her mission to stop Jarlath and the sea witch. *But I'm smart enough to know this can't last, and selfish enough to accept it anyway. Tonight, I'm going to enjoy myself with my friends.* Dylan smiled as she stepped out of the room and curtsied.

"You look beautiful, Dylan," Callan said as he took her hand.

Dylan squeezed his hand in response and together the pair—with Bump and Lump shadowing them—walked hand in hand to the main wing of the palace.

The palace was open in all of its splendor. The first ball she'd attended had been glorious, but it was simple compared to this. As they walked, Dylan saw that, in three different patios attached to the ballroom, there were little tide pools the size of her bed. Each sandy-bottomed pool served as a mini habitat. Brightly colored fish the size of Dylan's hand darted around crabs, starfish, sea urchins, barnacles, and more. Beautiful shells were arranged to shine in the light from the torches mounded around the tide pools, and the marble steps that formed the walls of the pool were covered with emerald cushions with saffron accents so guests could sit down and look in.

Trained sea birds—seagulls, white tailed tropicbirds, gannets, petrels, and even an albatross—were perched on gold stands and in golden cages. Guests were allowed to remove the birds from their perches and fly them

outside. The birds' trainers—on hand with buckets of little fish—would whistle, calling the birds back to their side.

Half the guests had arrived by the time Dylan and Prince Callan finished exploring.

Jarlath was there—along with his two friends—working their way through the liquor choices. When he caught sight of Dylan and Callan he spat out his drink, spilling liquor down his waistcoat, and stared. Dylan—and Bump and Lump so it seemed by his reaction—had neglected to tell Jarlath who was escorting her to the party.

They sailed past Dylan's shocked "guardian" and had time to wave to Lord Dooley and Cagney—Lord Dooley looked halfway decent for once, wearing a respectable black waistcoat and a vest in a bright shade of red—before Callan directed them to the marble dais where the royal family stood.

"Good evening, Dylan. Have you seen the tide pools yet?" Prince Viggo asked with a grin.

Dylan smiled widely.

"I thought you would like those. Oop. Here comes mother," Prince Viggo grimaced before straightening and holding out his arm to the young lady he was escorting. On Viggo's other side were Princess Fianna and her escort—a young lord. Princess Fianna curtsied to Callan and Dylan. Her eyes swept over Dylan, but she said nothing. She had always been more reserved with the selkie than her siblings were, but since the bandit attack, she was prone to eye Dylan like she was a water horse.

Several horns trumpeted, and King Rory and Queen Etain entered the ballroom, cutting the room in half as they walked towards the marble dais.

All present bent over in bows and curtsies, making the room an ocean in the hypnotic wave of the mass movement. The royal siblings and their partners waited until the king and queen climbed the dais before performing their own bows and curtsies.

King Rory nodded at his children and took up his position in the center of the dais, but the queen paused to greet her three oldest children. She embraced Fianna and said a kind word to her escort, kissed Viggo's cheek, and smiled at his partner.

"Callan, you look so handsome," the queen said when she reached Callan and Dylan. She kissed his cheek before turning her attention to Dylan. "And Miss Dylan, you look lovely," she said, her smile fond. "I

owe you a great deal. Perhaps more than I thought," she said, glancing at Viggo and Fianna. "Thank you for your bravery."

Dylan offered the queen a curtsey. *If only you knew,* she thought, but was touched by the queen's kind attention.

The queen squeezed Dylan's free hand before moving on to join her husband.

"Thank you for attending the annual Ringsted Summer Ball," King Rory said, his voice booming in the silence. "It is with great joy that we mark our summer season, and we take pleasure in the bounty and growth the summer provides.

"As is custom," the king continued, "the ball will be opened by my royal children—Prince Callan, Princess Fianna, and Prince Viggo—and their partners. Thank you, and enjoy yourselves."

Dylan turned to look at Callan with raised eyebrows. He hadn't mentioned anything about "opening" the ball.

Catching her look, Callan gave her a teasing smile. "I didn't tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise. We can dance anyway you choose. You'll enjoy it," he said, starting down the stairs. When Callan tugged on her hand, Dylan followed. Princess Fianna and her escort, and then Viggo and his partner, followed behind them.

The empty dance floor waited. Only the royal siblings and their partners stood in the middle of the immense space.

Dylan eagerly shifted her weight as the musicians—two flute players, three violinists, and what Dylan now knew to be a mandolin player and a harpist—eased into a slow song.

Fianna and Viggo started to dance with their partners, Dylan waited for Callan to lead, but he didn't move his feet.

Callan kept his hand in hers and placed his other hand on his waist before leaning in to whisper, "Dance as if you were going to dance for me. I'll keep up," he promised.

Dylan thought for a moment before she nodded. She waited to get a feel for the music before leading Callan forward.

Viggo and his partner danced in a slow box, repeating the few steps over and over. Fianna and her escort moved a little more, but they stayed together, slowly turning in a circle.

Dylan and Callan, however, crossed from one side of the dance floor to the other. Callan would twirl her, and Dylan would twist away from him

before drawing near again, like waves to the shore. They twined through the dance floor, sometimes facing each other before Dylan would duck under Callan's arm, then they would move side by side before Dylan twirled around Callan.

Once or twice, Callan shocked Dylan by sliding her down in a dip, but he always managed to pop her upright again.

Viggo and his partner had all but stopped dancing. Instead they watched Callan and Dylan glide by like swans landing in water. Fianna kept going with her partner, but Dylan saw the reserved princess flash her older brother a smile once or twice.

When the song finished, Callan raised Dylan's hand in his own before bending over in a bow, tugging Dylan into a curtsey. His siblings mirrored him, and all three couples quit the dance floor as swiftly as possible while the guests clapped.

"That was terrifying," Viggo cheerfully said as their parents joined them on the main floor.

"You did well, children," King Rory said, his posture stiff from nerves. Now that the royal children had danced, a new song began and couples flooded the dance floor. "No accidents. Always a plus."

"You all looked lovely," Queen Etain said. "Enjoy yourselves, but remember your duty as royalty," she warned.

"Yes, Mother," her children chorused before slipping into the crowd.

Callan and Dylan turned to go, but before they could slip away, Queen Etain called after them.

"Callan, Miss Dylan, if I may have a moment?"

Dylan turned back to face the queen, Callan with her.

"If you don't mind my asking, Miss Dylan, where did you learn to dance like that?" Queen Etain asked.

My family, Dylan wrote.

Queen Etain tilted her head and studied Dylan. "I see."

Why do you ask? Dylan wrote.

"It was quite beautiful, but it's not the sort of dance that normally graces these halls. I have seen a similar dance, twice before I married the king," she said, glancing at her anxious husband.

Where did you see it? Dylan asked.

"A small coastal village, near my family's holding," Queen Etain said.

Dylan stared at the queen. Did the queen know about selkies? Occasionally, they slipped into human celebrations, but only if they *really* liked the people. *No wonder King Rory married you. You must come from a tremendous and honorable family,* Dylan thought, a surge of affection for the motherly queen rushing her heart.

"Is that all, Mother?" Callan asked.

"Yes. Enjoy yourselves," the queen said.

"Of course," Callan said.

Can we find Cagney and Dooley? Dylan asked.

"Yes, although I am sorry to say that since you are my partner, you must circulate the party with me and dance with a number of lords and government officials," Callan warned her.

I'll find a way to make it worthwhile, Dylan promised, and she did. To her sorrow, she wasn't able to chat much with Cagney and Dooley before dinner. Too many men kept asking her to dance or tried to speak with her whenever Callan was dancing with a lady. However, Dylan learned that she could lead the men to the tables of food, allowing her to stuff her face and glean information from previously untapped sources.

She asked the older lords if they had been affected by the banditry and the younger men if they had witnessed any of the heists. She spoke with the ladies, inquired who belonged to families that were in the businesses of trade, and kept a watchful eye on Lady Kallah—although the snotty girl and her friends kept to the far side of the ballroom and did not once look in her direction.

Dylan received varying answers to her questions—none that illuminated Jarlath's banditry practices—but she enjoyed herself, although she thought her sudden surge of popularity a little odd.

Is it because Prince Callan is my escort? It makes sense, I suppose. He is their future ruler—although it is unnerving they are so quick to change their mind.

Dylan shook her head to clear the concerns from her mind and refocused on her conversation partners.

"The price of tea and spices is the highest it has been in a century," Lord Padriac said.

Lady Cayleen of Fowl Feather Merchants & Sons & Daughter—one of Cagney's business idols—raised a hand to smooth her gray hair. "Indeed," she sniffed. "And the varieties have become terribly limited."

“Can’t be helped,” Lord Padriac said, twisting his wedding ring on his finger. “All of us merchants are selling stock straight from our storehouses now—no new goods are entering or leaving Ringsted.”

If no new goods are popping up, Jarlath is definitely selling his stolen merchandise elsewhere. Dylan tilted her head as she pondered the matter before she wrote, *No one suspects there is something greater at work, and that is why the storms brew up and down the coast?*

Lord Padriac shifted uncomfortably. “Well…”

“Spit it out, lad,” Lady Cayleen said.

“Rumor has it that black magic is at play.”

Are they finally catching on? Dylan perked with interest and nodded to encourage the young lord.

“Before the ports and harbors closed, I heard stories of royalty being cursed, enchanters being taken captive—nothing good. And it seems that each country has been plagued by its own brand of trouble—like the goblins in Erlauf.”

“Or the witch queen in Arcainia—before she was slain. Oh yes, I heard it, too,” Lady Cayleen said when Dylan and Lord Padriac stared at her. “What you mean to say, young man, is that these storms may very well be how darkness has struck Ringsted.”

Lord Padriac slid his hands inside the pockets of his waistcoat. “Aye.”

“May the seas help us,” Lady Cayleen murmured.

“Or not,” Jarlath said.

Dylan rolled her eyes as he stepped into their circle. *How can one man be so* annoying*?*

“Hallo, Padriac, Lady Cayleen,” Jarlath said.

Lord Padriac bowed shallowly. “If you’ll excuse me, I should go find my wife. I expect the dinner will start soon,” he said, his voice cool and stiff.

“I’ll go with you, lad,” Lady Cayleen said, sniffing at Jarlath before following the young lord.

Well, the high esteem afforded to me certainly does not extend to Jarlath. Hah! Dylan thought as she watched the pair ease away from them.

Jarlath watched them go, a sneer budding on his lips, before he grabbed Dylan by the arm and yanked her closer. “So, thought I wouldn’t notice when you arrived with the crown prince?”

Dylan stared at Jarlath. *After all these weeks of inactivity,* tonight *is the night he finally deigns to take notice of my actions?*

"Pay attention, little fish, because your fairy tale is about to end. You're a selkie who can't sing or swim. Your two most useful traits, your *only* useful traits, are gone. If you don't do what serves *me* well, I'll slice your pelt to shreds," Jarlath spat. "And when I tire of the Summer Palace, we will return to Kingsgrace Castle and you will never again see the light of day."

Instead of making her feel small and helpless—as he surely meant to—Dylan could feel her fury build. *How dare he! He thinks because I'm on land I am no match for him? Forget my pelt—I will bear myself with pride when I incapacitate this sea worm.* Dylan glared and considered smacking the lord in the head with her slate.

"Lord Jarlath," Prince Callan said, his voice icy. "I see you finally separated yourself from your friends long enough to greet your ward. How *kind* of you."

"Prince Callan, how good it is to see you." Jarlath's voice oozed with charm as he turned to the unhappy prince. "I was just telling Dylan how lucky she is that you chose her as your partner tonight."

Callan laughed. "I believe you have incorrectly interpreted the situation, Lord Jarlath. I am the lucky one." He moved closer to Dylan.

She pursed her lips, although she didn't move away. *I'm thankful you arrived, but I could have handled this myself,* she thought, eyeing the handsome prince. *I am not a dewdrop damsel waiting to be saved.*

"If you say so, Your Highness," Jarlath said. "I am so glad my ward has found favor with you."

"What a surprise," Callan said. "You certainly did not appear to be glad when you were speaking to her just now."

"I was merely warning her to mind her manners—she was practically raised by animals, you know," Jarlath said.

Dylan drew her shoulders back and took a step towards Jarlath, glaring at him with fury. *Why you scum! Throw him in the brig.*

"I have often thought it is remarkable how elegant and well-mannered she is, considering who is charged with her care," Callan said.

Yes! That's a hit for Callan!

Jarlath's toothy smile was replaced with a dark scowl. "What?"

“Lord Jarlath, what a pleasure it is to see you!” Dooley said, sliding into the conversation with easy manners and a calm smile.

“Quite so,” Cagney added, smacking into Dooley when she didn’t stop fast enough. The pair breathed heavily, and their clothes were a little askew. They had probably pushed and elbowed their way through the ballroom to arrive.

“This is why I love a good ball—it gives a man a chance to socialize,” Dooley said as he tried to adjust one of Cagney’s mussed sleeves. Cagney smacked his hand away. “Ouch.”

“Balls are also excellent business opportunities—stop that,” Cagney hissed, trying to push Dooley away from her. “By which, I mean to say they allow a person to make good connections.”

Jarlath stared at the pair, utterly lost. Dylan, however, smiled widely at her friends to show her appreciation. *Thank you*, she wrote.

Prince Callan laughed. “Of course, you are both right. If you will excuse us, Lord Jarlath, I believe the dinner is about to start. I hope you enjoy yourself.”

“Yes, of course,” Jarlath said. He shrugged before returning to his almost-groveling manners and bowed. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

Prince Callan inclined his head. “Of course,” he echoed, offering his arm.

Dylan took it—if only to get away from Jarlath. Cagney and Dooley followed, relief flashing across their faces.

That was a well-timed entrance, she wrote when they stopped just outside the doors to the dining hall.

“I do pride myself on my entrances—and my fashion,” Dooley said.

Cagney’s eyebrow twitched with irritation. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

“You seem to be doing well for yourself—before Jarlath’s arrival anyway,” Callan said to Dylan. “I worried about separating you from Dooley and Cagney—although we’re sitting next to them for dinner.”

I enjoyed speaking to the nobles, she wrote. She was surprised when she realized her words were true. The people she met this evening were kind and affable—which contrasted sharply with Jarlath, Lady Aisling, and Lady Kellah.

“Ocean flower, do you have so little loyalty that any handsome face will move you? Are Cagney and I no longer your bosom friends?” Dooley asked.

“Lord Dooley. Princess Nessa acts with more maturity than you do,” Cagney said, her upper lip curling in disgust.

“How you wound me, gem of my desire. I see how it is. Both of you are on the up and coming.

“I see Mother and Father are in place—we better join them, Dylan, mother wants us to enter as a family. Dooley, Cagney—we’ll see you in just a moment at our seats.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Cagney curtsied.

Dooley winked—all signs of his tragic enactment gone. “Enjoy. We’ll see you soon, Cal, Miss Dylan.”

Callan raised a hand in acknowledgement and led Dylan towards his parents. Although the ballroom was crowded, a path opened up in front of them, and Callan wore his false smile and acknowledged murmured greetings with a nod.

Dylan caught Lady Aisling’s gaze, and the beautiful blonde looked away, her lips pressed tight in anger.

“Is everything alright?” Callan asked when they reached his parents.

Dylan shrugged at Lady Aisling and her petty antics before she smiled at the prince. *I’m fine. I was just thinking Dooley and Cagney care deeply for you*, she wrote.

“They care quite a bit for you as well,” Callan said, taking Dylan’s hand off his arm so he could clasp it.

Before she could respond, Queen Etain approached them. “Are you two ready? Good. We’re all here, let us open the dinner.”

The doors to the dining hall were opened, and King Rory and Queen Etain swept inside, followed by Callan and Dylan. Callan led them to their spots. They were at the head of one table, with Viggo and his partner seated across from them.

“We meet again,” Dooley said, wriggling his eyebrows when he and Cagney rejoined them at their table.

“That reminds me. Dooley, I’m afraid I didn’t see your entrance in the bustle,” Callan said. “What did you do?”

“It was a tame entrance—my pearl wouldn’t come with me if I overdid it.”

“You *still* overdid it,” Cagney scowled. “You made us ride up to the main palace in a cart shaped like a clamshell that was pulled by two white miniature horses.”

“That is because you were to be the pearl of the clamshell. You see? Because you are the pearl of my heart.”

The look Cagney gave him was murderous.

It’s a shame the marina opening is over, Dylan wrote. *You could have arrived in a boat pulled by a whale.*

Dooley lit up. “That is a stupendous idea.”

“It’s terrible. Whales are not domesticated. There’s no way for you to train a whale to pull a boat. *Dooley,* are you listening?” Cagney’s face was white with panic.

Dylan grinned and almost started to write out an offer to get Dooley matched up with a whale—she could communicate with them and ask for their help—before she remembered herself and set her chalk aside.

Dinner was over all too soon. Dylan loved every course, and even *she* was stuffed. In fact, she felt so full she couldn’t have eaten so much as another strawberry. After dinner, there was more dancing—Dooley and Callan danced with her, as did Lord Padriac, Prince Viggo, and even King Rory.

Jarlath never approached her again, and Lady Aisling, Lady Kellah, and their friends stuck to giving Dylan the occasional sour look. It was a perfect night—one free of guards and, even more rare, free of worries.

After all the exercise and the heat of the room, Dylan was almost lightheaded, so she navigated her way outside and gratefully sucked in the cool night air, accented with the salty scent of the ocean.

The particular patio she chose was mostly empty. A few younger women gossiped in one corner, glancing at her with disdain every so often, but that was all. She stood at the railing, watching the moonlight play on the ocean as the sea breeze cooled her off.

She felt almost refreshed enough to return indoors when Lady Aisling found her.

“Miss Dylan, what a *pleasant* surprise,” Lady Aisling said, her hair glowing in the moonlight. Behind her, Dylan could see Lady Kellah, Lady Darra, and some of their other friends.

Dylan made the only noise she could muster—a loud, blasé exhale. *These girls act more like predators than some sharks I’ve seen.* She raised an eyebrow at the lady and tilted her chin up.

“So, you got your way. Prince Callan has escorted not *me*—as he should—but you, the local beggar girl,” Lady Aisling said, her lovely

brown eyes narrowed into slits.

"You may think you've won, but no one from the royal family would stand to be connected to Lord Jarlath of Kingsgrace Castle—no matter how distant the connection may be," Lady Aisling continued. "The only reason the queen is allowing this *dalliance* to continue is because you saved Princess Nessa. I said it before, but mark my words: as soon as you are gone, Callan will forget all about you."

Dylan couldn't help the grin that twitched across her face. If Aisling thought she still stood a chance when Dylan returned to the sea, she was in for an awkward surprise. Sooner or later, Callan would make his move on that girl from the search party. He told Dylan himself that he loved her. Poor, poor Aisling. She didn't even know how far out of the running she was.

"And you *smile?* You think this is amusing?"

I think you *are amusing,* Dylan wrote.

Lady Aisling's beautiful face twisted, making it ugly. She took the goblet she held and flung it at her. Dylan tried to dodge, but the drink was flung wide and still spattered a part of her skirt. "Oops," the lady said.

"Dylan? Dylan!" Cagney said from the doorway, she tried to get past the girls, but they wouldn't let her through.

Dylan stared at Lady Aisling, her face thoughtful. She generally refrained from retaliating—it wasn't worth the effort—but that was before they ruined her dress. She liked her dress. It was sea-glass green. Callan had ordered this dress for her. As she stared down at her ruined skirt, her rope of patience with the silly lander-girls snapped. She walked to a nearby tide pool and draped herself across a cushion so she could look in at the water.

"You're not going to cry? That's disappointing. But we needn't stop here," Lady Aisling said as Dylan reached into the tide pool.

"If you touch her again, I will tell Prince Callan myself," Cagney shouted behind the wall of pastel skirts and dresses that blocked her from Dylan.

Dylan held her arm below the surface of the tide pool and waited.

"This doesn't involve you, Miss Cagney," Lady Aisling said, her voice hard. "And unless you want your family accused of stealing, I suggest you stay quiet. You have a sister who is a shop-keeper's assistant, and your

sailor brother is out of work, isn't he? Perhaps he is turning to banditry like other sailors."

"It's not true," Cagney said, trying to push a girl aside.

"Truth doesn't matter in the face of money, Miss Cagney. A few coins, and your innocent family members will be jailed for thievery," Lady Aisling said. "Know your place, *assistant*."

Cagney fell silent.

Lady Aisling turned to face Dylan—whose hand remained in the water.

"No! Leave Dylan alone!" Cagney shouted, her voice loud and forceful.

Dylan had what she wanted. In one smooth motion, the selkie lifted her soaking arm from the tide pool and flung an object with precise aim. *Smack!* A bright orange starfish hit Lady Aisling in the face. The creature slid down and landed on her dress with a splat, half-disappearing down her bosom.

Lady Aisling shrieked like a seagull, and her friends rushed to help her. When they'd rescued the starfish, the angered girls turned to face Dylan….who had several more starfish lined up on the edge of the tide pool, and another in her hand.

Dylan raised her eyebrows at the girls and motioned for them to come towards her.

No one did. Friends or not, Lady Kellah and her ilk were not going to risk a starfish to the face on behalf of Lady Aisling.

"You vile *beast*!" Lady Aisling spat, her hair coming out of the elaborate hairstyle it was tucked in. "When I tell everyone what you've done—!"

"You think they will be appalled that she defended herself and her close friend? Lady Aisling, I fear you have much to learn regarding the justice system, particularly if you believe a few coins can influence it," At the sound of Prince Callan's voice, everyone on the patio fell silent.

It was several long seconds before Lady Aisling and her ladies found the strength to face him.

The prince looked much how he had when Dylan had approached him on the beach—so angry that his face was a blank mask. His hazel eyes were uncomfortably empty.

"Your Highness, she—" Lady Aisling stammered.

“I am not interested in your antics, Lady Aisling. Hounding my partner will not make me turn my eye to you. Instead, it makes me concerned. Perhaps there is a need to *publically* announce that I feel you would make an inadequate queen, much less an unsuitable wife,” Prince Callan said, his voice holding the warmth of an icy sea.

Lady Aisling choked on her words, her eyes large with fear.

“I suggest you leave the ball tonight and return to royal-sponsored events when you are certain you have yourself under control. Good evening, Lady Aisling,” Prince Callan said, stepping aside.

Lady Aisling sobbed and ran past Callan. Her friends curtsied and darted inside, careful to keep a distance from her.

Dylan frowned at Callan as he ambled up to her and Cagney. *I had it sorted*, she wrote before she started placing starfish back in the tide pool.

“You threw a starfish,” Cagney said.

Yes.

“You hit Lady Aisling in the *face*! With a starfish!” Cagney said.

Dylan thought for a moment before she replied. *Some people need a starfish in the face. It does them good.*

“I don’t think a dozen starfish in the face could fix Lady Aisling.” Callan picked up the poor starfish Dylan had chucked and passed it over.

Dylan brushed the starfish off and gently returned it to its salt bath. *Thank you*.

Cagney, still shocked, turned to Callan. “A starfish, Your Highness. A *starfish*!”

I was kind. I could have used a sea urchin, Dylan wrote.

Cagney covered her eyes and grumbled.

How did you know what was going on? Dylan asked Prince Callan.

“Your guards found me and brought me here,” Callan said, indicating the short stocky silhouette standing next to the tall, oxen-shaped silhouette.

Dylan blinked. *Bump-a-Lump?* She wrote.

“Bump-a-Lump?” Cagney blinked, somewhat recovered.

Shortened from Bump and Lump. Besides, they move like one creature anyway, Dylan wrote.

“A very quiet but smart creature. Come, let’s get you cleaned up. Mother has a charm from a renowned Grandmaster craftmage—

Rumpelstiltskin. We can wave it over your clothes to get the juice out," Prince Callan said.

That is a marvelous charm.

"It is. She got it for Nessa when the mage last came through Ringsted. Nessa was always spilling and dropping things on her clothes when she was younger. Cagney—are you ready? Dooley isn't going to take the threat against you well."

"It has nothing to do with him," Cagney scowled.

That's not how he sees it, Dylan wrote.

"Yes, well, you threw a starfish! In someone's *face*!" Cagney said.

Does that make me a different class of person?

"It means your reasoning skills are off," Cagney said.

I believe that would indicate I think even more like Lord Dooley than you do, Dylan wrote.

"We're about to find out who is right. Here he comes," Prince Callan said, looking into the ballroom.

"My pearl!" Dooley said, looking angry for the first time since Dylan had made his acquaintance.

"Why me?"

Hours later, every muscle in Callan's body was taunt. He narrowed his eyes and tried to think about something—anything—besides the long, lithe woman who was stretched out across a bench, the expensive cloth of her skirts draping over her legs as she leaned into his side.

Callan exhaled deeply. "This was a very bad idea," he muttered into the chilly night air.

Dylan slept on, unaware of his words, her breathing relaxed and heavy. She moved, sparking awareness in Callan when her warm body shifted. They were alone on the patio as the last of the party goers filed out of the ballroom and the servants began cleaning.

"Don't you look like you're having fun." Dooley chuckled behind him.

Callan almost stooped in relief as his longtime friend strolled onto the empty patio. Dooley was certain to make irritating observations, but at least he would give him something else to think about besides Dylan.

"Don't even start," Callan ordered.

“Start what? Pointing out how tortured you must feel right now?” Dooley clasped his hands together and observed them head on, his gaze fastened on the mysterious girl. “It’s just as well the ball is over. The poor thing is tuckered out.” Dooley laughed. “She doesn’t even know what she’s doing to you, does she?”

“She has the personal space of a puppy,” Callan said, pained.

“Aye,” Dooley agreed, leaning against the patio railing. “Ever thought about kissing her while she’s out of it?”

Callan narrowed his eyes. Maybe his friend wouldn’t be a help after all. “I am attempting to be a gentleman.”

“Gentlemen are just patient wolves.”

“You would know that, wouldn’t you? Chasing Cagney takes quite a bit of patience.”

“Ouch,” Dooley said. “Fine, I won’t pull your tail anymore. She is lucky, though. Any lesser man might have taken advantage of her. Maybe Cagney should talk to her about it.”

“I suspect it is some kind of cultural difference. She gives her affection freely—with everyone from my little sister to Cagney,” Callan said.

“Yes. She did well tonight,” Dooley said.

“I’m glad you thought so as well. I was a little worried how she would react to the other nobles after being sheltered by you and Cagney for so long. She seemed to enjoy herself. I underestimated her.” Callan turned his neck so he could look at Dylan, his eyes softening with affection.

“Do you think she could pull off being queen?” Dooley asked.

“I don’t know. Although I trust her, I know so little about who she is,” Callan said.

“She’ll learn. When everything blows over, and Jarlath is tossed in jail, she’ll be fine,” Dooley said.

“I hope you’re right. But I can’t help but feel like we’re running out of time,” Callan said.

“We just have to find proof. Sooner or later, Jarlath will trip up, and his bandit ring will be exposed. Be patient—just like you are with Dylan’s innocence.”

Callan frowned. “I should throw something at you.”

“Please be gentle; I am so fragile,” Dooley said, giving Callan a winning smile.

“I do have a dagger on me.”

“In that case, I think I’ll be leaving. Now. Enjoy your torture,” Dooley said, making a hasty retreat.

Callan didn’t respond; his gaze was captured by Dylan, who was shifting in her sleep.

Chapter 13
Evidence

There's nothing. Why is there nothing? Dylan tried to grumble in irritation, but her throat was silent—irritating her further.

Dylan tossed an empty satchel aside and placed her hand on her hips. This was the last room that belonged to Jarlath's cronies. There *had* to be some speck of proof here. She hadn't followed Bump and Lump at ungodly hours of the morning to track them back to their rooms and have nothing to show for it!

Already cranky from the lack of sleep—the ball had gone *very* late—Dylan considered kicking a chair to express her rage, but feared the sound might draw soldiers to the room.

While conversing with guests during the previous night's ball, she had discovered there was another section of the palace. Set behind the stables was another wing built exclusively for soldiers, guards, and grooms. Following Bump and Lump led her to the stretch of rooms reserved for Jarlath's men.

It had taken every ounce of will she had, but she managed to pretend she felt ill during breakfast. It wasn't a hard role to play. The late night made Dylan feel like a whale that had just finished migrating. Excuse in hand, Dylan had scrambled into the bathroom, warning Bump and Lump not to enter. She shimmied out the back window and made her way down to their rooms.

It was a brilliant plan, and it had all gone rather well considering her last few plans hadn't achieved spectacular results. *Except I'm not finding anything!*

Dylan *knew* Jarlath was responsible for the bandits. His men were there! He had to be! But no one had so much as a speck of incriminating paper or evidence. She glared at the slobby room, her frustration mounting. Bump and Lump's rooms had been pristine and clean. These other cronies couldn't say the same.

Dylan dropped to her stomach, scrunching her nose at a sticky smear on the ground—left over from a dinner or breakfast. She checked under

the bed again, this time intending to inspect the frame or even the mattress if she had to.

Laughter sounded in the hallway, and the door rattled.

Dylan slid her whole body under the bed, pulling the blankets down to shield her. The door opened, and three sets of feet entered the room.

“I’m puttin’ the new orders here. Tell Scratch to burn ’em after he gets a look at ’em,” said a voice, rough like sandpaper.

She peeked under the tiny space between the floor and the blanket, but she wasn’t able to see any faces—just dirty boots.

“Be pullin’ out soon, yeah? That sea mage’ll have to move fast before the royals leave,” said another man.

“Probably. Be ready—Tell Oisin and Morri we’re leaving soon,” said Sandpaper Voice.

“Where are they?” asked the last man—his voice crusty like rusted metal.

“Watchin’ that selkie girl. I don’t like it.”

“The selkie girl? You shouldn’t—wench could bring the palace down on us if she weren’t mute,” Sandpaper Voice grunted.

“No, I don’t like Oisin and Morri sticking to her.”

“It’s the boss’s orders,” Rusted Metal said.

“Yeah, but are you sure they ain’t takin’ it too seriously? Last week when the boss was drunk as a skunk ’n wanted to see ’er, they tossed ’im in his room and stood in front of the door for the night.”

“They’re from Sole—whaddya expect? Everyone up there is a bloomin’ knight. Morals, ugh,” Sandpaper Voice said.

“Sole, what a bloomin’ joke,” Rusted Metal said. “Shoulda tried to get assassins from Verglas. Now *those* men woulda had this place trussed up in a week.”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on. Boss said to report in at noon,” said Sandpaper Voice.

“You reckon he’ll wake up? Oisin and Morri got in late last night—because of the ball ’n everything,” the second man said as feet thumped across the room and into the hallway.

“We gotta check, or he’ll rage like a bull,” Sandpaper Voice said before the door slammed shut.

Dylan waited another minute in silence to be sure they were gone before she slid out from underneath the bed. A new stack of papers was

tossed on a beat up wooden table. She snatched them up and flipped through them.

This is what I've been looking for. Marching orders for Jarlath's bandits—maps with markings on them that indicated which bandit gangs should camp out on what roads, even a list of caravans and lords to rob. There were supply lists, and a sheet of specific goods and items the bandits were supposed to find.

Dylan stuffed the papers down the front of her dress—stowing them with her purloined dagger. She eased the door open and peeked out in the hallway. No one was there.

She fled the barracks, slipped past the stables, and raced around the corner, aiming for the central palace wing.

Behind her a horse squealed; ahead of her, Dylan saw Bump and Lump speaking with three men.

"Easy, easy. Dylan?"

She turned around to see Callan, mounted on a large, chestnut horse, calming his mount after nearly colliding with her.

"Are you alright? What had you running?" the prince asked.

Dylan glanced back over her shoulder. Bump was staring right at her. Lump stood talking to the other men—probably Jarlath's lackeys she'd just overheard.

I need to tell someone—without Bump-a-Lump overhearing! Dylan twisted back to Prince Callan and stared up at him. On a horse.

But it was Callan. *I can trust him, and the royal family should know what's going on, horse or not.* Dylan crossed the distance between them and scrambled up the mount's side. The chestnut snorted but held still under Callan's gentle hand.

"Dylan?" the prince repeated as she slid on behind him.

She nudged the horse, shivering in revulsion as she tried not to think of kelpies.

Callan turned the horse and directed it through the gates, into Easky.

She clung to Callan but peered over her shoulder. Lump was still talking to the men, and Bump was watching her ride off.

Dylan squeezed her arms, tightening her grip on Callan. The prince responded by nudging his horse into an uncomfortable, jarring trot as he steered through the streets of Easky.

When they cleared the last village house and the last stray chicken, Callan's horse grunted and heaved forward into a canter. The sight and sounds of Easky were swallowed up by forest, and after a little bit, Callan slowed his horse back into a walk.

Dylan tilted her head, listening for the siren song of water as the horse plodded down the dirt road. If she was going to tell Callan, she wanted encouragement. She needed *strong* water.

Finally, she heard it—exactly what she was looking for. She waved her hand, getting Callan to halt his horse, and slipped from the animal's back.

"Dylan, what's going on?" Callan asked.

She shook her head and gestured for him to follow her into the woods. They brought the horse in far enough so he would be sheltered from the road by bushes and undergrowth before tying him to a large tree trunk.

Unfettered, Dylan sprang through the woods, moving lightly in spite of her long skirts. Callan kept pace with her, not complaining as they skidded downhill.

Her shoulders eased when she could hear it with her ears and not her sense of magic—the dull roar of a waterfall.

White, frothy water cut a path through slippery, slime covered rock. The air was cooler, and the water wasn't rapids, but it was too fast for her taste, so she led Callan up the hillside.

When the water flowed lazily over rock plateaus, Dylan left the hillside and splashed into the river. The riverbed was slippery, coated with algae, and the water was cool and crystal clear.

It took a moment for her to get used to it. The Chronos Mountains fed this river from melted snow, giving the water's magic a different flavor than the salty, immense water of the ocean. It felt less weighty, but sharper—like a faraway sight being brought into focus by a spyglass.

Peering over her shoulder, Dylan listened to the encouraging gurgles and chortles of the water before deciding to climb one level higher. She led Callan up to a miniature waterfall that wasn't quite as tall as she was. The water folded over layered rock that jutted out—like a fine croissant—making it easy to climb up. Above the little waterfall, there was a several-foot ledge before the river opened up into a deep pool where the crystal water turned sky blue. The waterfall just beyond the deep pool was much bigger, but it gushed with controlled, polite water that was more intent on

falling in pretty patterns as opposed to forcing its way through rock—as the falls did in the lower levels.

"I didn't know these falls existed," Callan said, looking up at the cascading water.

Here, she decided. She tied up the fabric of her skirts—today she wore a simple emerald green dress, one Callan had bought for her—before leading Callan over to several smooth rocks. Dylan plopped down on one and motioned for Callan to join her.

Callan—who had stripped off his boots when they first entered the river—tossed them aside and rolled up his breeches. "What's this about?" he asked, twisting away when she started fishing down the front of her dress for the papers.

She passed the papers over before she untangled her slate and pouch of chalk from her skirts while Callan skimmed the papers.

"These are Jarlath's?" Callan guessed.

She nodded. *He is responsible for the banditry. His friends are involved as well, but he runs it.*

Callan nodded and brought a new paper to the front of the pile.

You aren't surprised? she wrote.

"No. We—my father, myself, and others—have suspected it for some time, but we've never managed to catch any proof," Callan said.

So you are aware of the sea witch?

"Who?"

The sea witch. She's the one responsible for the storms that riddle the coast and the typhoons on Ringsted's northeast and northwest borders, she wrote. While Callan read her words, Dylan splashed her feet in the river, taking comfort from the solid strength of the waterfall.

"We thought magic had to be involved, but we hoped we were wrong," Callan said, his pleasant face smoothed into an expression of apprehension. "It's just one mage, though?"

Yes.

"She must be powerful. It takes at least two or three weather mages to break through her storms," Callan said.

She's not. Dylan wrote, clutching her chalk so hard she snapped it in half. *She's supplementing her power with the blood of innocent creatures.*

"The baby otter," Callan said, understanding lighting up the green flecks in his hazel eyes.

One of her victims, yes. She's slaughtered everything from whales to sea lions. With the excess power, she hides her trail—or my family would have hunted her down long before now.

"Your family isn't allied with Jarlath, then?" Callan asked.

Dylan raised an eyebrow at him.

Callan raised the papers. "I know, you wouldn't have brought me these if you were. But why is he your guardian, if that is the case?"

He is not my guardian. He is my captor—as much as I am ashamed to admit to being outsmarted by such a dull, debauched creature. I travel with him because he holds my—he exploits my greatest weakness. My family doesn't know where I am, she wrote.

"He's holding you *captive?* Why didn't you say something sooner? I will have him thrown in the dungeons," Callan said, his voice dark as he stood up.

She rolled her eyes and grabbed the sleeve of the prince's cotton shirt, yanking him back down. *I didn't tell you, because there is nothing you can do about it. If I displease him, there will be horrible consequences for me —even if you throw him in the dungeon.*

Callan studied her. He opened his mouth to speak, but Dylan shook her head.

She could tell him about Jarlath and the sea witch, but she couldn't break her silence on who she really was. It was a secret that was much bigger than she and her circumstances.

When retrieving these papers, I overheard a conversation between some of Jarlath's men. They said the sea witch will have to move soon—before you and your father depart for Glenglassera, I think.

"Perhaps they mean to attack us en route," Callan said.

Dylan shook her head. *The sea witch has no power on land—her magic is tied to the ocean. If she is to use her magic, she must be in the ocean.*

"We do follow the shore at several spots in our journey," Callan said, rubbing his chin.

I will see if I can find out more information, but it took me over a month to secure those papers, and I found them through sheer luck. I cannot promise I will find something more.

"Of course not," Callan said, brushing her hand with gentle fingers. "I'm a prince. I *do* have trained spies—although most of them are stranded outside of Ringsted due to the storms."

What next? she asked.

"I will show these papers to my father. We'll have to notify a few government officials, but we should have Jarlath imprisoned by nightfall," the prince hesitated. "How will that affect Jarlath's hold on your… weakness?"

As long as you do not name me as your source of information, I should be fine. Jarlath thinks I am ignorant of his plots and schemes. It will never occur to him that I was the one who passed on the information, she wrote. She remembered the way Bump and Lump watched her ride away with Callan, and for a moment her heart squeezed with worry. But…oddly enough…she felt that maybe, hopefully, they would keep their silence—as they had with all her other troublesome behavior. *The sea witch will be suspicious, but I suspect to her Jarlath is a tool. She needed a fortress near the sea to escape capture. Jarlath happened to have one.*

Callan crumpled the papers. "It's maddening to know that allies who care so very little for each other are so easily able to entangle us."

It is because they are evil, she reasoned. *The wicked—like the sea witch—always use shortcuts and supplements for power. If she went unchecked, she would pay the price for it. But I am not willing to let things grow that bad. She will be stopped before then.*

"But she's a *mage*. If she's powerful enough to keep typhoons endlessly active—whether it's through her powers or trickery—an army couldn't hold her. We will need a slew of other mages."

No, Dylan wrote. *My family will take care of her as soon as I can get to them.* Of this Dylan was sure. The selkies would have to blow the secret of their existence wide open and reveal themselves to humans through the mass use of their singing and water magic, but if that was the price to pay for eliminating the sea witch, she was certain her family would pay it.

Callan stared at her. "And I suppose if I ask who your family is, you won't tell me?"

Dylan smiled, tugging a sigh from the prince.

"So when Jarlath is imprisoned, what will you do?" Callan asked after several moments of silence.

He has something of mine that I must retrieve.

"At Kingsgrace Castle?"

I think so.

"I could send a squadron of guards with you."

She shook her head. *If you could keep all of Jarlath's men—including my guards—imprisoned, I can sneak into his castle alone and avoid suspicion.*

"That seems unnecessarily dangerous," Callan said. "And I'm not certain it is a good idea to arrest your guards. They seem good enough."

She shook her head again. *They are Jarlath's.*

"I wouldn't be sure about that. But I suppose you don't need to decide what to do immediately. Once Jarlath is secured, you will have time," Callan said.

Dylan shrugged.

"After you retrieve your weakness, what will you do?"

Warn my family, and stop the sea witch, Dylan wrote. If the worst came to pass she could bypass getting her pelt, and ride straight to one of her family's fortifications to warn them, but she hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Thank you," Callan added. "For the papers, and for trusting me."

Of course.

"I'm glad my suspicions were right, and you aren't Jarlath's ally," Callan said rolling up the papers and shoving them inside his boot for safekeeping.

She recoiled in horror. *You thought I would AID such a witless man?*

"He said he was your guardian, and you didn't refute the story. What else was I to think?" Callan asked.

Dylan scowled at the prince. It had never occurred to her that anyone might *not* trust her. Why wouldn't they? It was beside the point that it had taken weeks for Callan to win *her* trust.

Callan laughed—a pleasing sound that brightened her bad humor like the steady chant of the frothy waterfalls.

"Truly, Dylan, given our history, I did have a terrible time of it," Callan said.

Our history? she wondered. Did that mean…did he remember? He couldn't—otherwise he would know what she was!

She was distracted from her thoughts when Callan took her hand and stood, pulling her to her feet.

"How did you know this waterfall was here? Through some kind of water magic?" Callan asked. "I know you have something. You knew that kelpie was coming before anyone could have spotted it."

She shrugged.

Callan smiled and slid his arms around her, pulling her close until she bumped into his chest. “Mother is going to think you are a saint. You already achieved great heights in her graces through saving Nessa. Nabbing Jarlath will put her over the moon,” Callan said, standing cheek to cheek with her.

Dylan found it very difficult to concentrate, and her heart beat erratically. *What’s wrong with me? I’m not a twitterpated pup,* she thought.

“It’s a good thing. We need her on our side,” Callan said, pulling back.

She tilted her head and gave the prince her best confused look.

“Yes, our side. That is, if you’ll join me?” Callan said, his face drawing closer and closer.

Oh, she thought in a moment of rare enlightenment. *I think he means to insinuate that he likes me. And I…I love him.* Dylan was not upset at all by this thought as Callan drew so close his breath brushed her lips. Every decade or so, a selkie married a human. It wasn’t taboo; it was just unusual that a selkie would want a lander. But Callan would suit her just fine. *Yes, I think I’ve loved him for a while,* she thought, closing her eyes and leaning into Callan.

Just before Callan’s lips could brush against hers, her eyes snapped open. *Barnacles. I LOVE him. He’s going to unseal my voice!*

She backed up so fast she ripped herself out of Callan’s grip and almost landed on her rear. She staggered and managed to prop herself up on the rocks, giving herself a moment to think.

“Dylan?” Callan said. The tone of his voice was pitched to cover up the hurt in his voice, but she still heard it.

She held up a finger to the prince, asking for a moment. She pushed her wild hair out of her face and thought.

Jarlath hadn’t been caught yet, and even if he was, she *knew* her pelt wasn’t at the Summer Palace. If it was back at Kingsgrace Castle, there were two possibilities: The sea witch could be gone, in which case she could descend upon the bandits with as much spite as she wanted—they were too afraid of her to go for her pelt. However, the sea witch may be there. If that were true, sashaying up to the castle to reclaim her pelt would be impossible with her voice back—the sea witch would use it as leverage.

No. As much as it infuriated Dylan, it was best to keep her voice sealed. She scowled, ill-humored with the sudden turn in events. She

raised her gaze to Callan, who studied her with an emotionless mask.

Dylan fussed with her slate for a moment before writing, *Not until after Jarlath is captured and my weakness is mine to own again.*

"So, you're not saying no to me, just…not yet?" Callan asked.

Dylan nodded before she threw her arms around Callan and squeezed him. She kissed his cheek and buried her face in his shoulder lest either of them be too tempted. He eased his arms around her and rested his cheek on her hair.

After a few long, sweet moments, she pulled back. *We should return,* she wrote before a sly smile crept across her face. *You have a lord to fish for.*

A hint of a smile crept across Callan's face, and he nodded. "I do. Home, my lady?" he asked, offering his hand.

Dylan nodded and clasped his hand in hers before the two returned to the rocks to retrieve their shoes and set out.

The ride back to the Summer Palace was shorter than Dylan remembered. Both the villagers of Easky and the guards at the palace gates were remarkably blank-faced at seeing their prince ride through—disheveled and wet—with an equally disheveled and wet Dylan perched behind him.

Callan stabled his horse and led Dylan up to the main palace. When he moved to go towards the governmental wing, Dylan stayed where she was, pulling on his arm.

"My father will be in the governmental wing at this time of day, with all the officials we need to show the papers to," Callan said.

Dylan got out her slate and wrote *Lunch.*

Callan stared at the slate before outright laughing. "I don't know whether to be impressed or appalled that arrests take a backseat to your stomach. Very well, find something to eat and then come to the governmental wing. I'll tell the guards on the bridge to expect you, and they'll show you to Father's public office. Is that agreeable?"

Dylan nodded as her stomach growled.

"Take care," Callan said. He tucked some of her wild hair behind her ears before leaving, his steps quick and even as he walked away.

She watched him go and then entered the main palace, turning in the direction of the kitchens. She rounded a corner and smacked straight into Jarlath, almost sending the shorter man sprawling.

"There you are," Jarlath snarled. "Come on, we're leaving."

Her heart froze. *What?*

She moved to write on her slate, but Jarlath took it from her hands and threw it away. "Oisin, Morri. Take control of your charge!" Jarlath grunted when Dylan elbowed him in the gut and turned to run.

Lump moved to stand in her path, and Bump ghosted up behind her, penning her in. They grabbed her arms with a bear-trap grip. She was caught.

"Don't dawdle. We're leaving. Now!" Jarlath said, leading the way out of the palace and down the winding path to the stables and palace gates. "We would have left an hour ago, but we couldn't locate you," Jarlath said, eyeing her. "A complication you will pay for."

What was going on? They couldn't leave! If they left, Callan and his father wouldn't be able to arrest Jarlath!

I should have let Callan kiss me. Then I could scream, and someone would stop us! Dylan wriggled and fought her guards.

As they approached the gates, Jarlath's coach rolled up.

"Ride with her," Jarlath ordered Bump and Lump before he mounted up.

Bump and Lump stuffed Dylan in the carriage, joining her in the stuffy compartment and blocking the doors.

Dylan spent most of the ride fighting them—kicking out, lunging for the door, and silently growling at them. Neither Bump nor Lump said a word.

By the time they arrived at Jarlath's castle, she was spent. Defeat sat on her shoulders with the weight of a whale. Jarlath had—unintentionally—outmaneuvered Callan. Callan would need to put together more than a squadron of soldiers to rip Jarlath from his own home. It might be days before Callan could march against him. And who knew what Jarlath would do in the meantime? Did he know that Callan had proof of his activities? How could he? Dylan had *just* given the prince the papers.

Dylan staggered out of the carriage, tired from fighting for the whole drive.

“Retrieve the selkie’s pelt,” Jarlath ordered one of his men as he approached Dylan and her guards. “How was the drive? Did she behave herself?” he asked, sliding a hunting knife from his belt as he eyed Dylan.

Dylan swallowed her fear and built her resolve.

“Quiet as a kitten,” Lump said. She tried to swallow her surprise.

“Good,” Jarlath said before pointing at Dylan with his knife. “Behave yourself,” he ordered.

“Lord Jarlath,” Dylan heard the sea witch’s voice as a path opened up between the men in front of her. “You took your time in arriving.”

“You could have given me more notice. I pulled my men together as soon as I received your summons. Have you finished, then?” Jarlath swaggered across the stable yard.

“I have made enough charms to keep you and your men safe when I bring the tidal wave down on the palace,” the sea witch said, indicating a small chest a servant carried for her.

What! Dylan stiffened in Bump and Lump’s grasp. They were going to kill Callan—they were going to kill *everyone*: Dooley, Cagney, the servants, the visiting nobles, the villagers!

Jarlath took the chest and opened it, inspecting its contents. “There’s only a dozen charms here,” he complained. “I need more men than that to take the palace.”

“There will be no palace to take. The tidal wave and accompanying storm will crush it,” the sea witch said. “You are there to make sure no one escapes. The royal family must perish, as well as everyone with them. The Ringsted government must be slaughtered. As soon as we finish destroying the Summer Palace, we move on to Glenglassera.”

“That isn’t part of our deal. You said Glenglassera would remain intact; that’s why we are killing the royal family at the Summer Palace,” Jarlath frowned.

“My orders have changed. Glenglassera is to be rubble,” the sea witch said.

“You can’t, Yseult,” Jarlath said, his face turning ruddy with anger. “If Ringsted loses Glenglassera, any other country can take us over with ease—mountain range or not.”

“Your silly country *will* be taken over, Jarlath. Did you think my superiors would give up occupation after laying waste to your

government?" Yseult laughed. "Now will you back down, or do you still want in?"

Dylan's legs almost gave out. She was in over her head.

The selkies hadn't taken into account the human side of the storms, but even further, Dylan and her kin hadn't bothered to wonder *why* a sea witch would suddenly have run of the country. The sea witch wasn't doing this on a whim. She mentioned orders. There were a masterminds behind this. There was a strategy.

Based on what Dylan learned at the Summer Palace, she didn't think the sea witch and her masters would stop with Ringsted. It was likely they attacked Ringsted because they were easier to isolate and they had an extensive fleet of ships that would be very handy for attacking other countries.

This calamity was much bigger than Dylan and much bigger than Ringsted.

Why did I ever think I could solve this on my own? Dylan wondered as she stared at the ground.

"Will I still receive the agreed-upon amount?" Jarlath asked after several moments of silence.

"Yes."

"Then I'm in," Jarlath nodded.

The sea witch released a gurgling laugh. "You are a fool, Lord Jarlath. But in some ways, you are even crueler than I am. I seek to crush a country; you seek to crush your *home*."

"So?" Jarlath snarled, puffing up like a blow fish.

The sea witch shook her head. "I will attack at sunset. See to it that you and your men are in place. I must prepare—it will take much to collapse the palace."

"Of course," Jarlath said.

The sea witch turned to go, but she caught sight of the selkie. "You still drag her with you?"

"Do you need her?" Jarlath asked.

"No. Do what you wish with her—kill her, imprison her, I care not. The selkies have been less of a pain since her capture—their morale is gone. After tonight, we need not fear them any more—the shed blood and lives will give me enough power to deflect them," the sea witch said before she strolled in Dylan's direction.

Dylan grew stiff with anger, but she forced herself to remain still as the sea witch stopped less than a foot away from her.

"Soon, I will be beyond you and your shape-shifting kin," the sea witch spat.

Callan. She's going to kill Callan! And Nessa, and the kind cooks, and Cagney and Dooley, and the seamstress…a parade of humans marched through Dylan's mind, and hatred built in the pit of her stomach. Everything Dylan had come to love over the past season would be wiped out.

"And you—youngest child of the Sea King Murron—you can do nothing to stop me," she smiled.

Dylan roared silently and ripped herself from Bump and Lump's grip. She threw herself at the sea witch, snarling and scrabbling like a wildcat. She pulled out a chunk of the witch's hair and managed to half choke her before Bump and Lump recovered and pulled her off the witch.

"KILL HER!" the sea witch ordered.

"Where's her pelt?" Jarlath shouted.

"Not here yet, sir," a man said.

"KILL HER!" The witch shouted again.

"You said she was mine to do with what I please—throw her in the treasury!" Jarlath ordered.

The sea witch roared in anger, making Dylan's scalp prickle. Bump and Lump dragged Dylan from her presence, hustling through the castle.

Dylan almost tripped down the steps that led to the treasury, but Lump caught her just in time.

When they reached the treasury, they pushed her inside. Bump grunted and shook his head.

"Foolish," Lump translated.

Dylan shook out her skirts and eyed her guards. They said nothing more and left the room, closing and locking the door behind them.

Dylan tried pulling on the door and shoving against it, but it was as solid as stone. Angry, she turned to the treasury and began a systematic destruction of anything breakable. She threw golden lamps into the walls—denting them—and pushed stone statues to the floor.

Someone had brought a large barrel of water down to the treasury to save themselves the trouble of carrying a bucket for the sickly kelpie. Dylan emptied a bucket or two of water on a fur cape before she decided

the bigger revenge was to the nurse the kelpie back. She emptied three fourths of the barrel on the animal—staying far out of range of the dehydrated creature.

It looked better than the last time Dylan saw it. A servant had probably been giving it more water than Jarlath prescribed.

Good, Dylan thought savagely, throwing another bucket of water at the beast. Her arms ached, and her lungs were on fire. Dylan's head swam as thoughts crowded her mind. *Callan. Callan!*

Dylan dropped the bucket and collapsed on the cold stone floor. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed in silence. Tears rolled down her face, and Dylan mashed her fist into the floor, but nothing abated the pain in her heart.

She was going to lose. Everything. She would lose her human friends; Ringsted would fall to whatever evil the sea witch's masters had in store, and the selkies would be hunted down and destroyed.

Cagney and Dooley were going to die, as would the royal family, everyone in the palace, and *Callan*.

No. No. No! Dylan shouted in her mind. Dylan's heart twisted and she gasped and struggled to see through blurry eyes. She had made so many mistakes. Would the outcome have been different if she had been more careful? If she hadn't been caught, could Dylan and her family have ensnared the sea witch?

Miserable and enraged, Dylan looked up when the door thumped and opened.

A livid Jarlath, accompanied by several guards, strode in the room. "Wench!" Jarlath hissed, grabbing Dylan by her arm. He started to drag Dylan to her feet before he remembered she was a great deal taller than he, and pushed her back on the ground. "You do that again, and your pelt will be shreds," Jarlath said, shaking Dylan's sea lion skin in her face.

Dylan dully stared at the pelt. *I should have ignored the threat. I should have kept my voice and smote the sea witch and Jarlath when this all started. Swimming in the ocean as a sea lion is nothing compared to Callan's laugh, or Cagney blushing when Dooley flirts with her,* she thought.

Jarlath either didn't notice her apathy, or he didn't care. He roughly folded the pelt and took a swipe at Dylan—which she ducked.

“I gave you too much freedom at the Summer Palace, but the rules have changed now. Behave yourself, and I’ll keep you as a pet, like that one,” Jarlath said, indicating to the kelpie. “Cross me again, and your pelt will be shredded. Push me after that, and I’ll have your head. Do you understand?” Jarlath said, his expression mean.

Dylan closed her eyes.

“Do you understand!” Jarlath thundered, grabbing her hair.

Dylan wriggled in his grasp and glared at him.

“Good. You will remain here until I return. Next you see me, the royal family that you cherish will be dead.” Jarlath smiled.

Dylan watched him go with narrowed eyes. As soon as the door closed behind him, she threw an already banged-up lamp at the door and screamed inaudibly.

Chapter 14
Stopping Storms

Dylan wasn't sure how much time passed. She was in the middle of "redecorating" the treasury by hacking at a prized tapestry with one of the swords that hung on the wall when the door swung open again.

"Ahem."

Dylan dropped the sword and spun around, her heart beating in her throat. There stood Bump and Lump. Bump was scratching his cheek with one of his daggers, and Lump took slow inventory of the methodical damage she was inflicting on Jarlath's prizes.

Lump shrugged, and Bump pushed a pile of gold coins off a table. Lump unrolled a map of Ringsted and held it down on the cleared surface. "We are here," he said, tapping a point on the map.

WHAM! Bump shoved his dagger an inch into the table's surface, pinning the spot Lump had pointed out. "The Summer Palace is here," Lump said.

WHAM! Bump slammed another dagger at the spot.

"In the carriage, we had to travel east to pick up a road before moving north and then finally west to get to the Summer Palace. On foot, you travel on a diagonal—here," Lump said, tracing out a path. "Summer Palace is less than an hour's ride that way."

Dylan stared at her guards with wide eyes. *They're…helping me?*

Bump grunted.

"Yes. Wait five minutes while we ready a mount," Lump said.

Dylan took a step forward.

Lump pointed to the door of the treasury. "We will leave door unlocked, but shut. Do you understand?"

Dylan nodded.

Bump pulled out his daggers, and Lump rolled up the map. They turned to leave, and Dylan scurried after them. They stopped when they realized she was following them.

Dylan paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to express thanks. After a moment, she curtseyed, hoping they would understand.

Bump grunted.

“You’re welcome. Be careful—we’ll be at the front gates,” Lump warned. He and his comrade left.

Dylan heard them thump up the stairs. She ran back to the weapons rack to swipe a sword, when the kelpie jingled his chains. Dylan twisted to look at the creature, who stared at her with glazed, white eyes.

Its breathing was quiet instead of the pained wheezes it used to utter. Dylan stared at the creature.

If she wanted to get out of Kingsgrace Castle in good time, she would need a distraction. *Do I dare?* she wondered. She hesitated a moment before grabbing a battle hammer that hung on the wall. *Yes. Even a kelpie doesn’t deserve to be chained up by a monster like Jarlath.*

Dylan approached the water horse slowly, eyeing it as she sidled up to its pen. When it didn’t lunge or snarl at her, she took a chance and swung the hammer, bringing it down on one of the hinges. Two more swings, and it smashed. Dylan hit the other four hinges that held the loops of chains in place. After cracking the last one, she jumped back, scrambling for cover behind a large statue.

The kelpie reared, shrugging chains off its back. It made quick work of the wooden fence that made up its stall, splintering the wood like it was matchsticks. Dylan crept to the treasury door and opened it, hiding behind the wooden structure to make an open gateway for the kelpie to flee through.

The monster charged through the doorframe, moving oddly as it climbed the stairs. She stood at the base of the stairs until she heard splintering wood and men scream. Then she scrambled up the staircase and slipped through the castle—her path open in the trail the kelpie blazed.

The kelpie trashed the castle and sent servants and bandits running just by appearing in the hallway. With eerie intelligence, the beast navigated its way outside, jumping two stairs before making a break for the open castle gates. The animal squirmed through and disappeared into the forest, its dull black fur sinking into the shadows.

Bump and Lump watched the creature go and held onto a nervous-looking horse. Bump raised his eyebrows at Dylan, who smiled winningly.

“Brash,” Lump muttered before tossing Dylan up in the saddle. “Head northeast,” he instructed. “Good luck.”

She nodded, still feeling nervous on a horse, but desperate enough not to care. She heeled her horse into a trot. They, too, left the castle—which still clamored with alarm from the loose kelpie—and dove into the woods. Branches scratched at her arms and legs, and more than once she got a face full of leaves, but she clung to the saddle, and the horse picked its way through the woods.

Soon her behind grew sore, and her legs ached from holding on. She wanted to push the horse to go faster, but Lump said it was almost an hour's ride. She didn't want to exhaust the only mount she had. So, she let the horse move at a steady trot, even though her heart screamed at her to go faster.

Eventually, Dylan could feel the faint pull of the ocean—which steadied her and helped her stay in the right direction. They plowed through the forest, making it to a point where the woods opened up over a cliff, letting her see the ocean and sun and even the faint glimmers of the Summer Palace a mile or two up the shore.

I might not make it, Dylan realized, failure roaring in her ears. *I need to get there* and *find Callan to break the stupid seal—I won't have time!* Already, she could see the stirrings in the ocean where the sea witch was gathering the tidal wave. Dark storm clouds gathered above the area, and the ocean swirled as the sun started slipping beyond the horizon.

Thunder and lightning pealed in the storm the sea witch was working. Her horse squealed and bucked, sending her toppling from its back. It cantered off, disappearing into the woods.

No!

She ran after the horse, skidding down the hill. The horse slowed, but it didn't stop, and soon it was out of sight. Dylan ran until her lungs burned, and her head hurt. When she couldn't run any farther, she slumped to the ground, gasping for air. Her mind was silent with terror and fear.

After all of this, she wasn't going to make it. Dylan curled her hands into fists and pounded the forest floor as tears of frustration blurred her vision. Her heart stopped when she heard a low, crooning sound. She raised her head. Through her burning tears, she saw a water horse—not just any water horse, but the one from Jarlath's castle. She recognized the faint dapples on its hindquarters. It rose out of a pond like a vengeful ghost.

Dylan stared as the monster picked its way towards her and stopped in front of her. When she didn't move, it stamped a foot and lunged at her.

Dylan jumped to her feet and scuttled backwards, waiting for the animal to attack. Instead, the kelpie twisted and looked at her with white eyes, waiting.

Slowly, with one shaking hand extended in front of her, Dylan reached out and brushed the monster's fur. It was slick from the pond and had algae and other sediment stuck in it. Its mane was sticky when Dylan buried her hand in it. Her heart pounded, but the kelpie didn't move.

Why isn't it killing me? Could it mean for me to…impossible! Dylan thought, staring at the horse.

Red light from the setting sun danced through the trees, and Dylan grimly shook her head. *I'm out of time. Unless I reach Callan I will die in the backlash of the tidal wave as well. I may as well chance it*. Without taking a moment to think of a better plan, Dylan heaved herself onto the kelpie. She flailed for a moment—half on, half off the monster. The beast could have thrown her, but it stood still until Dylan slid into place on its back. She sank deeper into its fur than she thought possible, and the fur she previously thought of as slick grabbed her like a sea current, pulling her flush against the water horse.

The kelpie made a low keening noise.

Uh-oh, Dylan thought. *Perhaps I have made another brash deci*—all thoughts fled her mind when the kelpie lunged forward, heaving its body into a gallop.

The ride was more terrifying than anything Dylan had ever experienced—and she swam in ocean currents in the middle of storms. Riding the kelpie was much how Dylan imagined riding a sea dragon would be. All she could do was cling to the monster as it galloped with a force and power beyond any normal animal.

Twice, she was almost knocked from the kelpie by low-hanging branches, but both times the kelpie seemed to hold onto her—the same way it could drowned its victims without arms—and continued to surge forward like a typhoon.

The terrifying ride stole Dylan's breath, and she could have screamed with relief when they left the dark forest for the orange-bathed shore. The Summer Palace was a short distance away. Dylan could see people pouring from it. On the horizon was the tidal wave, immense and tall—a work that went beyond nature. The tides sank back as more ocean water piled on the tidal wave, making it crest so high, it would hit the tallest tower of the

main castle wing. Even if everyone cleared the castle they would still be wiped out. A tidal wave that big would gush a mile inland.

Some seemed to know this, for Dylan saw a circle of men standing by the beachside wing of the palace, facing their doom.

The kelpie pounded up the beach, spraying grains of sand as it charged towards the palace. Her heart in her throat, Dylan realized one of the men standing on the beach was *Callan*!

I can still do this! she realized. *I could still make it!*

"NO!" a voice howled, barely audible over the roar of the ocean and the cracks of thunder.

The kelpie raced past a group of a dozen or so men. Dylan barely had time to recognize them as Jarlath and his bandits, waiting like vultures with their protective charms to see to it that all perished.

Callan—seeing the crazed rider on the kelpie—ran towards her.

Dylan placed her hands flush against the kelpie. *Thank you,* she thought before pushing off the animal. She slid off its side, tumbling to the sandy beach with more force than she was prepared for. The kelpie didn't stop running. Instead, it turned and charged into the ocean, water surging forward to meet it. It shrieked, and then it was gone.

Callan zipped across the sand, reaching Dylan just as she regained air in her lungs.

"Dylan! What were you thinking, you idiot!" Callan yelled, skidding to a stop.

Looking between his legs, Dylan could see Dooley and Prince Viggo in the circle of men watching the incoming tidal wave.

"You could have been killed—and now you're going to *be* killed," Callan said, anguish coloring his voice. Dylan managed to suck in enough air that she could sit upright. She reached up and hooked her hands on the lapels of Callan's white waistcoat before twisting on the ground to look at the tidal wave. It was so close now it was blocking the sun. Soon, it would surge over the land and wipe out the palace.

"Dylan—" Callan started. Dylan pulled on his coat, wrenching him to the ground, and kissed him soundly. The prince was frozen in shock for a moment before he slid his arms around Dylan and cradled her close.

Light gathered around Dylan's neck like a collar before exploding outward, wrenching the pair apart.

Callan blinked, dazed, but Dylan scrambled to her feet.

“I need your help,” Dylan said, her voice scratchy. She expected some kind of reaction and was surprised when Callan simply staggered to his feet.

“What can I do?” he asked, his face and voice calm.

Dylan pointed to Jarlath’s men, who were running across the sand, pounding in their direction. “Guard me,” she said.

“Of course,” Callan said, turning his back to her and sliding his sword out of its scabbard.

Dylan turned to meet the incoming tidal wave. It stretched almost directly above her, like a colossus. Dylan sucked in air and began trilling a note. Her voice broke, and the note fell flat. The water pushed forward, without hesitation, swallowing up the palace marina.

Dylan reached deep in her heart, feeling for her magic and every ounce of power she could muster. Thinking of Callan, Dooley, Cagney, Princess Nessa, Lord Padriac, Neil the kitchen boy, and all the others in the area who would perish if she failed, Dylan sang.

Selkie songs were wordless. They were haunting but beautiful croons and trills. This time, though, words slipped from Dylan’s tongue.

A blight upon the silver sea—
Death has rotted your shores.
Listen now to me and feel,
The path redemption offers.

Beyond all understanding, Dylan’s quiet voice echoed, tolling above the roar of the angry ocean and the screams of the terrified. Time slowed, and the wave went from an angry surge, to a slow crawl.

“No!” Jarlath shouted.

Callan backed into Dylan’s line of vision, set his shoulders and barreled into the fight.

Dylan kept on, her voice stretching high and then sweeping low in a crooning note as smooth as a lake surface.

A wretch commands, but I request,
Destroy this pact and recoil.
Destruction wrought upon naïve
Brings only darkness and ruin.

The tidal wave didn’t move forward, but the water in it swirled in an angry storm. Its deafening roar continued.

Swords clanged and clashed behind her, but Dylan licked her lips and sang again.

A price too high, blood poured thick,

Beware lies spoken in darkness.

Spare this land, and hear my call—

Sleep once more, ocean floor.

"No!" the sea witch screamed. She stood out on the water, safe behind the tidal wave. "FORWARD, *I command you*! *Crush this place*!" the witch shouted, pushing with all the power of her magic and the dark sacrifices she had made.

Dylan's singing smoothed over the witch's raging screams, filling the air like a ringing bell. Now she didn't sing words but voiced the twisting notes and croons of her people as she tried to soothe the water, bringing it under her control. Behind her, swords clanged as Callan fended off attackers—Dooley and Viggo joining him.

"Stop you wretch!" Jarlath screamed. "I have your pelt—I will destroy it!"

Dylan raised her arms as she sang, and two huge sea serpents made of water slithered forward from the tidal wave. They were at least three times their usual size—a reflection of the massive amount of power Dylan was attempting to channel.

A brigand jumped at Dylan, his cutlass raised, but Callan lunged to block it with his sword. He charged forward with his scabbard, hitting the bandit in the knee and driving him backwards.

Dylan hit a series of high notes—her voice vaulting up to the skies—and the serpents turned and barred their fangs at the tidal wave. Slowly at first, inch by inch, the tidal wave retreated. Soon, it sped up so it was moving out like a tide.

"I will not be outdone by a lone selkie! I cannot be outdone!" the sea witch screamed.

Perhaps if you hadn't shed blood for your purposes, but you did. And the ocean always takes vengeance for its own, Dylan thought. She walked across the shore so she stood in the shallow water that remained as the tidal wave crept back.

The witch screamed curses and magical orders, but her spells slid off the ocean like sea water trickling from a whale's back.

Dylan kept walking until she was knee deep, her voice still soaring high and keening low in an unearthly song that wriggled into the hearts of all who heard it and plucked at the walls placed there.

The sea witch turned, moving to retreat. Dylan couldn't keep pushing the wave back out and capture her, and she knew it.

That was when the first selkie arrived.

Carlow—one of Dylan's cousins—burst out of the sea, his pelt wrapped around his waist, and broke into a song that supported Dylan's. His soothing tenor complemented her clear-bell singing.

Two more selkies popped above the ocean surface, scrambling to land with their pelts wrapped around their bodies so they could sing without struggling to float.

Selkies up and down the sandy short broke through the water surface and spilled onto land, forming a beautiful and eerie chorus with their heart-breaking, crooning voices. The selkies sang to accompany and highlight Dylan, and the tidal wave fell, swelling into the ocean with a massive roar.

While the tenors and altos backed Dylan—easing the ocean so its fall was not as violent as Dylan feared—the sopranos and basses keened in the background, casting waves and currents like nets around the sea witch.

The magic of some of the other strong singers eased onto the scene—Dylan saw her father's magic-shaped-Kraken and Maureen's humpback whale swim beneath the sea witch. But they moved the witch towards the land—pushing her, though she fought every step of the way. When the deep baritone of King Murron—Dylan's father—picked up volume, Dylan lowered the volume of her own song and joined the chorus of her kin.

Her father's water-made Kraken grabbed the sea witch with one long tentacle and flung her onto land when King Murron's voice boomed over the shore.

Four strong selkie warriors grabbed her by the arms and dragged her up into the forest where she wouldn't be able to use her magic as Dylan and the rest of the selkies quieted to a hum. Their song was complete.

Dylan let the last notes of the song fade, and her sea serpents collapsed into the sea, casting spray high into the air.

Then she turned around.

"You ruined it all! You useless wench!" Jarlath screamed, his face red with rage as Dooley held the shorter, stocky man with ease. Spittle flew

from Jarlath's mouth as he shouted obscenities and kicked a tattered piece of hide at her.

"That is no way to speak to a lady," Dooley said. He cracked the short lord in the head. Jarlath fell like a sack of rocks.

Dylan bent over and picked up the tattered material. Her ears roared as the ocean had minutes ago when she recognized the burnished bronze color.

It was part of her sea lion pelt.

As if she were in a dream, Dylan floated forward, stopping at the mounded pile of her shredded pelt. There wasn't a piece that was bigger than her hand. In the first moments of the fight, Jarlath had torn her sea lion pelt until it resembled a ragged, tattered puzzle.

She knelt by the pile and found it hard to breathe. Her ears rang, but she could hear people shouting. Callan's and Dooley's voices stuck out above the rest, but a few of her selkie cousins faded in and out of her hearing.

Her heart was in turmoil. The sea witch was defeated! Jarlath was prisoner! Both of them would pay for their actions, and no one else had been hurt. Furthermore, Dylan had her voice back. She could sing and talk and *shout* if she wanted to.

But the price.

Dylan would never again play beneath the ocean waves in her quick, flexible sea lion body.

She did not regret her actions. But it was a steep and costly price to pay.

Warmth bloomed around Dylan, and she realized Callan was kneeling beside her, his arms thrown around her. She sank into his embrace, her eyes burning as her heart ached.

"I'm sorry," Callan whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Although Dylan had spent the past weeks envisioning the day she reclaimed her voice, her mouth could form no words. Instead, she clung to Callan, who anchored her, and let herself be soothed.

Her undoing came in a deep, rumbling voice. "Daughter."

Dylan looked up into her father's kind, weather-worn face. "Da," she whispered. Callan helped her stand before she staggered forward and threw herself at her father—who towered over her by at least a foot.

King Murron picked up his youngest daughter, cradling her. His eyes—deep like the oceans—took in the tattered remains of her pelt. “You did well,” he said. “You’re safe now.”

Dylan shook before the anguished cries of heartbreak tore from her chest. All she could do was hug her father and cry with relief and loss as Callan and her sisters looked on.

At dawn the following morning, Callan found Dylan as she perched on the chair-like boulders out by the beach. Bump and Lump—who still followed her even though Jarlath’s bandit ring had already been exposed and marched against late in the night—stood in the shadows of the trees. Bump was tossing a dagger and catching it without looking. His eyes were focused on Dylan. Lump, however, was watching their surroundings, and he hinted at a bow to Callan as the prince made his way across the beach. He looked exhausted.

Dylan offered the prince a tired smile, but loss and heartbreak still shone in her eyes.

“Aren’t you going in?” Callan asked, nodding his head to the sea. “You usually do.”

She shook her head. “No,” she croaked. “I…no.”

Silence hung heavy between them, and after a few minutes Callan said, “I know it was you who saved me.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Two years ago—over two years ago, now that I think about it—when I was shipwrecked. You were the one who pulled me to safety.”

“How could you remember? You were unconscious. At least you better have been unconscious. You weigh as much as a walrus,” Dylan said, narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

Callan laughed. “I had fleeting moments of wakefulness. I woke up once while you were pushing me to shore, and then I regained consciousness once or twice while you were singing. I didn’t know you were a selkie, but I knew you saved me.”

“If you didn’t know I was a selkie, how could you have thought I saved you? No human could have done all of that.”

Callan’s expression turned wry. “I thought you were a mermaid.”

“A *mermaid*?” Dylan said, outraged.

“It seemed like the only explanation at the time.”

“But a *mermaid*? You thought I was one of those daft, silly creatures who is always crooning like a second-rate selkie and styling her hair? I’m not sure I want to talk to you anymore.” Dylan swiveled in her rock seat so her back was to Callan.

Callan chuckled. “I apologize. I didn’t know it was such an insult.”

“It *is*,” Dylan stressed. “It is the worst one you could give me. I would have rather been mistaken for a whale! How could you have thought that? Mermaids don’t live in Ringsted—that’s why we selkies settled it!”

“Yes, but I’ve seen several mermaids before in my sea travels. I had never before seen a selkie,” Callan said.

“We *are* good at shielding our presence,” Dylan said, somewhat mollified.

“Yes. But I don’t think you can be hidden anymore,” Callan said, looking back at the palace.

Although most of the selkies had swum home the previous night, about thirty of them—Dylan’s family and a number of warriors—had chosen to spend the night at the palace. The warriors remained to guard the sea witch—although she was being kept unconscious. Dylan’s father and mother—Sea King Murron and Queen Gwenllian—remained to speak to King Rory and Queen Etain about all that had happened.

Last night, Dylan—shocked and exhausted as she had been from channeling so much magic—realized that her father was even considering an alliance with the Ringsted king. Dylan suspected part of this might have been spurred on by the obvious connection between her and Callan.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Dylan asked.

“Pardon?”

“If you knew it was me who saved you, why didn’t you say so instead of hinting so vaguely?” Dylan turned back around to face the prince.

“When I first saw you at the festival, I didn’t think it *could* be you,” Callan said. “I’d spent a year and a half searching near and far for you—it was partially why I thought you were a mermaid even though I recalled that you had legs. Nice ones. I couldn’t find you in any town, village, city, or holding in Ringsted. I had given up hope—which was how Mother managed to push me at Lady Aisling.”

“You were looking for me? Why?” Dylan asked, wanting to hear the right answer.

“Because you captivated me. I wouldn’t say I was in love with you—I was half-drowned after all—but I’ve spent a great portion of my life feeling… uncomfortable with the public. Sitting with you on the beach—soaked, half-dead, and fleeting in and out of consciousness—I felt more at peace than I had ever been with any other girl. I wanted to find you in hopes that we could forge a relationship. Didn’t you feel anything from our encounter?”

Dylan judged that this was *not* the time to tell Callan she didn’t place him as the man she saved until a day after meeting him again. “You kept almost dying whenever I tried to leave you. It was quite frustrating.”

Callan laughed, the sound from deep within his belly. “I probably deserved that for the mermaid comment.” He rubbed his eyes and slid from the boulder, landing on the sand with a thump. He sat in front of Dylan’s rock chair, leaning his head against her legs.

“Didn’t get much sleep?” she asked.

“I didn’t sleep at all. I rode out in command of the soldiers and guards who raided Kingsgrace Castle. I returned an hour ago to tell Father our findings.”

Dylan leaned forward, half-bending over the prince so she could see his face. His eyes had dark circles under them, but he offered her a satisfied and weary smile.

“And? How did Jarlath do it?”

“It seems the mage—Yseult is her name—approached him about three or four years ago, right after his father died and he inherited his title. The agreement was that Yseult would use Kingsgrace Castle as a safe base to hide—its location was perfect as it was off the coast but not too far a ride, and it was positioned close to the Summer Palace as well. In return, Jarlath was given the chance to make a great deal of money. He started recruiting bandits and brigands from other countries before Yseult closed us off with the storms. He set up the banditry ring and—with Yseult’s help to get through the storms—worked out a shipping schedule to get the stolen goods north to be sold in various black markets. The boats sailed far enough out of sight so no one on land would see them, and Yseult parted the storms for him.”

“Where did he get the ships? I didn’t think Jarlath owned a trading company,” Dylan said.

“He doesn’t. His friend, Lord Doyle, has a small fleet of three ships, and his other friend, Lord Teige, owns a small harbor. They were part of the scheme—although they have since been taken into custody. They were hiding at Kingsgrace,” Callan hesitated before he continued. “I take it the weakness that Jarlath had was your seal pelt?”

“Sea lion. I was the only selkie in Ringsted to have a sea lion body, but yes,” Dylan said.

“Impressive,” Callan said.

“Not really. It’s a little embarrassing actually—sea lion selkies are considered to have bad blood. But I’m the youngest daughter of their king, so what would anyone say? Besides, selkies are not naturally cruel, and my singing made up for my unfortunate pelt appearance,” Dylan said.

“No wonder you took those shrewish ladies in stride,” Callan said.

“Because I’m used to being different? Yes. Anyway, Jarlath got my pelt when I foolishly ran on land to chase after the sea witch.”

“But what about your voice?” Callan asked.

Dylan scowled and looked out at the ocean. “That was me. I ran from Jarlath’s men and stumbled upon a Lady Enchantress who offered to seal my voice so I couldn’t be forced to abuse my magic. I’m still trying to decide if it was a wise decision or not,” Dylan said, making a face. “There were so many times where if I could have just sung, or *shouted*, the end might not have been so close.”

“But you would have had to pay with your pelt anyway,” Callan said. “No one was hurt.”

“No people, but the animals in the ocean paid for it,” Dylan said, sadness seeping into her voice.

Callan stood and dusted sand off his clothes before he rested his arms on Dylan’s shoulders.

Dylan rested her forehead on his stomach. “I’m afraid, Callan. I lost my pelt, and I don’t know what happens to a land-bound selkie.”

“You take one day at a time,” Callan said, his voice steady—like the waterfall where he and Dylan had nearly kissed—but warm. “And when the dust settles, we’ll be together,” Callan said, stooping so he could kiss the top of Dylan’s head.

“Why?” Dylan asked in a small voice.

“I love you, Dylan. After all the fighting I’ve had to do to find you and keep you here, I’m not going to let you go,” Callan said.

“Even though I’m a selkie?” Dylan asked, pulling back so she could look up at Callan.

Callan’s smile was soft and caressing as he tugged Dylan up to a standing position. “I love *you*. No matter what race you are.”

“You would love me even if I was a mermaid?” Dylan asked.

“Even if you were a mermaid,” Callan chuckled.

Dylan closed her eyes and rested her head on Callan’s shoulder, drooping with relief. She knew Callan, and she hadn’t thought he would reject her for being what she was…but it felt good to *know* that he still loved her. He was an anchor for her in a world that had just been flipped upside down.

“You will be a loved princess and a remarkable queen of Ringsted,” Callan said.

Dylan snorted. “What makes you think that?”

“My own reasoning. Cagney agrees with me,” Callan added.

“I’m not certain your subjects will.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, everyone in Ringsted has a great love for the ocean—especially for shipping things *across* the ocean. Do you think they will recoil from a queen who can *control* the ocean to their benefit?”

“I can’t control the ocean itself—just volumes of water,” Dylan corrected him.

“I don’t think anyone will see that as being any less desirable,” Callan said.

“Oh. Well, in that case,” Dylan said, perking up. “Is that an official proposal?”

“Would an official proposal see me killed by your father?”

Dylan thought for a moment. “It might,” she said. “At the very least it opens you to being bossed around by Maureen, too.”

Callan winced. “Perhaps we should wait a little.”

Dylan rolled her eyes. “It would be easier to push back the tide than keep Maureen from domineering.”

“I was thinking more of your father,” Callan said. “Perhaps he would be mollified if we had a long engagement?”

“I’m not certain.”

“That’s no good. Unless I tie you visually and firmly to me, I suspect someone will try to carry you off. No, I want my claim staked. I will have to suffer your father’s wrath, and hope a late wedding will mollify him.”

“Are you certain you want to do that? You don’t know me,” Dylan said, tilting her head as she stared unnervingly into Callan’s eyes “I know all about you, but I haven’t been able to talk for the past month. My sisters say I have a big mouth, and I don’t know when to be silent. I might drive you crazy; you might regret our engagement,” Dylan said.

“I have an understanding of your temperament, my sea lion, even if you couldn’t speak,” Callan said.

“But how?”

“You threw a starfish at a lady. That is a pretty good indicator of what kind of personality you have,” Callan said.

“Oh,” Dylan said.

“And if we are being truthful, it is a good thing you couldn’t talk this past month.”

Dylan furrowed her brows. “Why?”

“Because your voice is lovely like the dawn, and I would have impulsively grown to love you in days instead of weeks—and that time gave me space to sift through things,” Callan said. “Any other objections?”

“I can’t think of any right now.”

“Good,” Callan said. And he kissed her.

They were together for mere moments before someone hollered, “Oi! That’s it. Your chaperone has arrived. Back off, squirt.”

Callan growled in the back of his throat and turned to see Cagney, Dooley, Princess Nessa, and a woman who was even taller than Dylan march across the beach.

“That would be Maureen, my eldest sister. She’ll be the Sea Queen after Da,” Dylan said. “She’s the bossy one I mentioned.”

“I look forward to dealing with her,” Callan said, his voice dead.

His open frustration got a giggle out of Dylan, which lightened Callan’s expression. “Feeling better?” he asked.

“A little.”

“I know it’s a loss you’ll grieve for life.”

“Perhaps, but the outcome was worth the sacrifice,” Dylan said, her eyes thoughtful as she looked out at the sea. “And…” she trailed off,

silenced under Maureen, who approached them with all the calm of a hurricane.

“First of all, there must at all times be a salmon length between you two,” she said, wrenching Dylan from Callan. As she was a few inches taller than Dylan, she was also a few inches taller than Callan, and she wore a menacing expression.

“Maureen,” Dylan rolled her eyes. “You aren’t my ma.”

“Maybe not, but Da said to keep an eye on you two. He hasn’t approved yet, you know. He said he needs to get to know Rory better—Etain, too. In the meantime, I shall sit on you.”

“I think the term is babysit,” Dooley offered from behind the tall, warrior-like selkie.

“That is precisely what I said,” Maureen said. “Dylan is the baby of our family.”

“Ocean flower, I am beginning to sense in what kind of environment you were raised,” Dooley said.

“I think it is wonderful,” Cagney said. “Lady Maureen was telling me that selkie women are able to be independent and can even serve as warriors. The selkie culture sounds fascinating. I hope to convince your parents to begin trading with them.”

Dooley looked back and forth between Maureen and Cagney, a frown teasing the corners of his mouth. “Yes, I suppose it would be a good opportunity,” he said.

“We could expand the business into untapped markets. I’ll have to do some research first. It would be wisest to understand and observe the selkie culture before we make a trading venture,” Cagney said.

“Our family would gladly host you,” Dylan said.

“Before you invite outsiders in, Dylan, you should ask Ma and Da—or myself, as I am a future leader of our people,” Maureen said, folding her arms across her chest.

“That’s silly,” Dylan scoffed. “Cagney is my friend. Our parents won’t give a bark.”

“Perhaps, but it is still wisest to go through the official streams of communication,” Cagney said before turning to Maureen. “Could I stay with your family?”

“Of course—our family would gladly host you,” Maureen said.

Dylan rolled her eyes.

“What about me?” Dooley asked.

“What about you?” Cagney asked.

“Where will I stay?”

“In Glenglassera, of course,” Cagney said.

“You mean to tell me I can’t come with you?” Dooley asked, his face falling.

“Of course not. You’ll be needed in Glenglassera when the storms subside and foreign trading resumes,” Cagney said.

“That’s the price that comes with being a lord and a merchant,” Callan said, a hint of slyness tilted his smile to an alarming angle.

“But, pearl of my heart, I cannot part with you,” Dooley said. “Can’t you do research from Glenglassera?

“But the culture—”

“I shall perish without you, my gem,” Dooley said, clasping his hands and raising them in Cagney’s direction.

Cagney narrowed her eyes. “No, I think I should go.”

“Then I shall accompany you—merchant heir or not. Mother and Father are always telling me to learn more about the business,” Dooley resolved.

“No,” Cagney said, shaking a finger at him. “Your entrances to social gatherings are bad enough. I don’t want to imagine what offensive scene you would cause when introducing yourself to Dylan’s kinsmen.”

“You wound me, pearl!”

This changes everything, Dylan thought, watching her friends. *It’s not just that I can’t be a sea lion…but if I marry Callan, it means the selkies will have to come forward. No separate, secret existence. No more wondering what humans are up to. With Callan of the land and me from the sea, we will join our people together. Like we should have a long time ago, maybe.*

Dooley’s moaned pitifully and Cagney walked away from him in disgust. Callan dragged his eyes from his best friend to meet Dylan’s gaze and return her smile.

“Things will work out,” Dylan said, taking Callan’s hand.

“They will,” Callan agreed, squeezing her palm.

“No touching!” Maureen shouted before chopping at their joint hands, breaking the contact.

Dylan ignored her sister and looked at the sea. Her heart still twisted to know she would never be a sea lion again, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t see that the future was bright and fun.

Epilogue

The engagement party of Prince Callan—eldest son of King Rory and Queen Etain of Ringsted—and Princess Dylan—youngest daughter of the Sea King Rory and Queen Gwenllian, took place at the end of summer and the beginning of fall—roughly a month after the sea witch's defeat.

Some of the coastal storms had broken up—Glenglassera would officially be launching ships back into trade in one week. But the party was held at the Summer Palace, on the eastern sea border of Ringsted, where the typhoons still raged next to the Chronos Mountains. The presence of the typhoons didn't bother any of the guests—the storms were too far off to cause them any troubles, and everyone already knew they would eventually break up. With the sea witch captured and unable to pump power back into them, the storms were fading—like a top running out of energy.

The party was held with great joy and pomp. There were tables of food—more food than had ever been at any party ever before.. It became apparent that Dylan was not the only one in her family to possess an enormous appetite. Ringsted scholars theorized it was due to selkie's seal forms and the energy it took to maintain two bodies. Of course, Dylan—who was still lean even though she ate as much as her father—somewhat ruined their theory, but no one minded all the food anyway. The selkies, if anything, were extremely joyful recipients of food.

The celebration was attended by dozens of selkies, most of the noble families of Ringsted—although Lady Aisling and her parents were conspicuously absent—and a good deal of the party was open for all subjects—commoners, servants, and villagers alike.

Music and dancing were central—including performances by selkie dancers, who were stunning with their twirls, flips, leaps, and shows of physical strength and agility. There was even a choir of selkies who crooned and manipulated water for the wide-eyed villagers and nobles. (Dylan joined the song at the climax, drawing gasps of delight and wonder with her magic-forged sea serpents.)

"I think I understand why you say you are considered an average dancer," Cagney said, staring at a male selkie dancer, who had performed a

series of forward flips earlier in the day.

“Good,” Dylan said, selecting a grilled sweet potato and putting it on Cagney’s plate. “I don’t like accepting compliments that aren’t true. If you wished to compliment my singing voice, well, that would be different,” Dylan said, choosing two sweet potatoes for herself before leaving the table. “Come, I think they’ve almost finished seating everyone,” Dylan said, glittering in the pink light of twilight.

Dylan wore a strange hybrid outfit. Her dress was the length of a typical selkie garb—hitting her just above the knee, showing off her long, lean legs. It was gathered and tailored in the torso and shoulders, although it showed a hint of Ringsted fashion by poofing out slightly instead of falling flat on her legs as her sisters’ dresses did. The skirt of the dress was black, but the torso was made of satin that was Dylan’s favored shade of sea glass green. The sleeves and shoulders of the dress were black, but veined with some of the aqua-colored satin fabric, giving the illusion of wings curling around her arms. To add to the unusual garb, a dagger was strapped to her calf.

No one batted an eye at the outfit, though. Dylan looked tame compared to some of her selkie kin—especially the male dancers, who walked around without shirts.

The sun was an orange globe on the horizon, casting coppers, purples, and pinks on the ocean, setting the perfect stage.

“What are we sitting for anyway? I thought your people finished dancing an hour ago.” Cagney said, following her friend down the marina stairs—which now had railings, were wider, and had been roughened to prevent slipping. Most of the food and about half the entertainment was held on the marina. The other half took place at the beach, but the demonstrations and feats of entertainment had been stopped so servants could bring out a legion of chairs.

“For the show,” Dylan said, her eyes tracing the crowd as she climbed down the stairs.

As if he could feel her gaze, Callan looked up and caught her eyes. He smiled and gestured with a few of his fingers for Dylan to come to him.

“What show?” Cagney asked.

“The show—the ocean show,” Dylan said, smiling widely at Callan before she nodded.

“I don’t understand,” Cagney said as they cleared the last step.

“Some of my father’s subjects put together a show to celebrate my engagement,” Dylan said, breaking her gaze away from Callan to look at her friend.

“Why?” Cagney blinked.

“I *am* a princess—even if we don’t use those titles often,” Dylan modestly said. “Besides, I’ve always been something of a favorite with these subjects.”

“I thought you said a lot of selkies found your boundless energy and your loud voice tiresome,” Cagney said as the pair skirted past the rows and rows of occupied seats—the royal marina had almost emptied, and there wasn’t an empty chair except in places of honor that were being saved.

“Yes, but I never said that selkies were putting this on, did I?” Dylan said, nudging Cagney to the open chair beside Dooley.

“…*what*?” Cagney hissed, but Dylan was already scurrying across the sand, sliding into her seat next to Callan—in front of their families.

“I brought food,” Dylan said gleefully, offering Callan a grilled sweet potato.

Callan took it and kissed Dylan’s cheek. “Thank you. Did you get enough for yourself?”

“For the moment, yes,” Dylan said.

Palace servants lit several candelabras that were dug into the shore. They scurried out of the way, and two groups of selkies—six in each group—stood on either side of the candelabras, framing a piece of the ocean as a stage of sorts.

“In honor of the Princess Dylan—Daughter of King Murron and Queen Gwenllian—we aid the ocean in expressing its boundless joy that the youngest selkie princess has found her lifelong love,” one selkie said.

“Should I be worried?” Callan murmured to Dylan.

“Nope, this will be fun,” Dylan said. “Some of them migrated here just for today, even though it’s the wrong season.”

“Migrated?” Callan asked.

Dylan wasn’t able to answer him, for the selkies started singing—their voices making a soothing chorus that lulled all the listeners, reminding them of the bright sun in the sky. Water rose from the ocean, twirling and twining through the air like ribbons.

The Ringsted subjects were impressed with this feat alone, so when the first dolphin jumped through a ring of water they gasped in surprise and delight. Five more dolphins leaped into the air, landing back in the water with tremendous splashes.

Far out in the ocean, two huge whales breeched, filling the air with a throbbing, drum-beat-like call.

“Blue whales?” Callan, said, staring at the rarely seen creatures.

Suddenly one orca, located much closer to shore, leaped from the ocean, and twisted so it fell on its back, splashing white water high in to the air. Farther out behind him, two humpback whales slapped their tails on the water surface, causing even bigger splashes.

The humans shouted, some even bolted from their chairs—Princess Nessa among them—craning to get a better look.

A kaleidoscope of sea creatures paraded through the water stage. Sea lions played with a ball from Princess Nessa, otters linked paws and—with some selkie help—floated in the shape of a heart.

“Don’t some of those whales prey upon some of the creatures we’ve seen?” Callan asked.

Dylan nodded. “They do, but a selkie wedding is a joyous occasion. Especially ours.”

“Why?” Callan asked.

Dylan’s smile turned sad. “Because we stopped the witch, and ended the shedding of innocent blood. Also, you forget. Even though I’m to be your wife, I’ll still be a guardian of the sea. Sea creatures aren’t like humans. They don’t understand country politics and structure, but they know the selkie kings have always guarded them, and now one of their own is to be joined with the humans. They don’t grasp most things, but they *do* know this will bring change.”

“Good change,” Callan said.

Dylan smiled. “Good change,” she agreed as the performance ended.

Humans swarmed the beach to gawk and stare at the ocean behemoths, who remained floating on the water surface. The whales gleamed in the setting sun, and sea lions barked, hollered, and carried on before distributing wet kisses among anyone who dared draw close enough to them. (Princess Nessa dared, multiple times.)

“Dylan. Hi, Cal,” Murphy said, acknowledging her future brother-in-law. “Dylan, do your humans have any ships we could borrow?”

“Why?” Dylan asked.

Murphy pointed out at the still raging typhoon—which was visible against the color-streaked sky.

Dylan perked with interest. “You want to break up the storms?”

“You can do that?” Callan asked.

“To a certain extent,” Dylan said. “It takes a lot of us. Basically, we take control of every spot of water in the area—the water in the air included.”

“It’s difficult, and we couldn’t do it when the sea witch was around to replenish the storm’s power. It would have been fighting a losing battle,” Murphy said.

“But you want to break up the remaining storms?” Dylan repeated.

“Yes. It’s taking too long for them to die out. I don’t relish any of the sea witch’s handy work hanging around longer than necessary. I asked Father; he said maybe.”

“Let’s do it,” Dylan said, her eyes glowing.

“Wonderful,” Murphy said.

“Right now,” Dylan said.

“What,” her older sister said.

“You *didn’t* expect that answer?” Callan asked, his eyebrows raised.

Murphy shot Callan a look.

“Let’s rip the storm apart tonight,” Dylan said.

“That’s crazy! The sun is setting,” Murphy said.

“And the moon and stars will be out for us to navigate by. It will be fine. Let’s go,” Dylan said before turning to Callan. “Are any of the royal ships around?”

“One,” Callan said.

“One won’t be enough. We should wait until more arrive,” Murphy said.

“I’ll ask Dooley. Cagney said three White Sands ships arrived this morning,” Dylan said, leaping from her chair and scrambling towards her friends.

“Sorry,” Murphy said to Callan. “I didn’t think she would react so eagerly and impulsively.”

Callan laughed as he also stood. “She *only* acts eagerly and impulsively. But that’s part of her charm.”

“Glad you see it that way, because I don’t,” Murphy said bowing and trailing after her sister.

No less than an hour later, the selkie royal family *and* half of the Ringsted royal family were secured on the only royal ship in the palace marina, heading straight for the typhoon.

A White Sands ship sailed on either side of the royal vessel, filled with selkies in their human bodies. The White Sands Trading Company ships would peel off when they reached the typhoon, and be stationed on either end of the storm as the royal families went straight for the heart of the tempest.

“Is this safe?” Queen Etain asked, her hands white with strain as she gripped a railing on the deck.

The selkie Queen Gwenllian tilted her head. “Why would it ever be safe?” She asked in a sing song voice, her expression serious.

“I knew we shouldn’t have come with them,” Queen Etain said, her face growing white, too.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Mother,” Princess Fianna said, eyeing one of Dylan’s shirtless cousins.

“Your daughter is right, my lady,” King Murron boomed. “Even if the ship splinters, I can guarantee we’ll all make it. Selkies—and anyone in their care—don’t drown.”

“How reassuring,” King Rory said, his expression slightly pained, although he looked around with curiosity.

“Here we go. Everyone tied to a mast?” Maureen called from the quarter deck at the back of the ship as the White Sands boats drifted away.

“Aye!”

“Altos, start the chorus!” Mairead shouted from the crow’s nest.

Even though the ships were separating, the hum of the altos could be heard above the thundering sky and howling winds.

“Sopranos, with me!” Maili shouted.

“Basses, tenors, begin!” King Murron boomed, his voice carrying over the water.

The choir of selkies gathered, their eyes hinged on the storm as they approached it, their volume building. Their voices moved together, like

waves tossed on the ocean, swooping up and crooning low.

"Lead singers, begin!" Queen Gwenllian said.

Each ship contained a lead singer. Dylan was the undisputed lead for the royal boat, and she and Callan stood on the forecastle, as far in front as they could get, gripping the wooden railings. As she launched into her part of the song—the lead singers from the other ships sounding like a far-off echo—the ship dove straight into the storm.

Rain pelted them like hailstones, and the waves crashed against the sides of the ship. Lightning flashed overhead, and thunder boomed, like giants slamming clubs into a mountain.

The ship rolled on the ocean like a toy, but the selkies' song grew louder in spite of the violence they faced.

A wave hit the forecastle, almost tossing Dylan over the side, but Callan was there. He yanked her back into the ship.

Dylan pitched her voice high and keening—not unlike the whale songs they had heard on the beach. Her sea serpents burst from the ocean, reaching towards the sky. Barely visible through the rain were the water-shaped, magic-made creatures from the other soloists—one was a killer whale; the other was a polar bear that appeared to walk on the ocean's surface.

The magic-forged animals roared.

There was another crack of lightning and a peal of thunder, but the rain lessened, hitting in giant spatters as opposed to stinging pelts. The ocean moaned, but the selkie chorus swallowed the sound up, soothing it and teasing apart the waves.

When the howling wind lessened enough that the three lead singers could be heard—their voices combining in a beautiful croon—most of the fight was over. The ocean waves calmed, and the rain stopped falling. The wind still blew with more force than necessary, but this time it was to their advantage, for it broke up the cloudy skies.

After half an hour of selkies singing, stars peeked through the wispy clouds, and the ocean was calm again.

"That," Prince Viggo said, his eyes bugging, "was incredible."

"Tidy work. Well done, everyone," King Murron said.

"I wonder how one might go about harnessing such power," King Rory said.

"*Dear*," Queen Etain hissed, glaring at her husband.

“I have often wondered as well,” Mairead said, jumping the last few rungs from the ladder that led up to the crow’s nest. “I found a book about water wheels, but it seemed to me that it was thinking on a scale that was unnecessarily small.”

“I’m glad,” Callan said, leaning over the edge of the boat with Dylan to look out at the ocean.

“That we took the storm apart? Me, too,” Dylan said.

“That, and that our families get along so well,” Callan said.

Dylan looked back at the two sets of royals. “I worried,” Dylan admitted. “I *like* your family. But some of my sisters can be intolerable.”

Callan laughed and shook his head. “I suspect you think so because they were forced to rule you with an iron grip lest you go off and get yourself killed. No, I was more worried about my father being offensive with his curiosity, or mother being ungracious. Or Fianna taking too much interest in your cousins. Come to think of it, I’m still worried about Fianna taking too much interest in your cousins,” Callan said, narrowing his eyes at his sister.

“As you recall, Da was my original concern,” Dylan said. “My mother I could eventually bring around. Besides, she is the one who brought the sea lion selkie blood into our family. What more damage could a little human blood bring?”

“Ahh, yes, your father. He’s been remarkably pleasant since I met him, as long as I take care not to publically ravish you,” he said with his polite smile.

“That’s because he decided right off you were the best choice for me.”

“Why?”

“The first time I formally introduced you as my…as the man I loved, was when the bandits were still being rounded up.”

“I remember.”

“I wanted to go with you to round them up.”

“I remember that, too,” Callan said.

“And you said no, so I stayed behind.”

“…and?”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me. You said *no*, and I stayed behind,” Dylan repeated.

“You mean he admires that I got you to do something you didn’t want to do?” Callan asked.

“Yes. He thinks I’ll be safe with you, well-guarded and well cared for.”

“I’m glad he thinks so. Although I can’t take credit for finding you such good guards. I don’t think there’s anyone in Ringsted who could beat Oisin at daggers or Morri at wrestling,” Callan said, still watching his sister by the light of the brilliant moon. “Are you going to be okay?” Callan asked after several moments of silence.

“Okay?” Dylan asked.

“About your pelt and your sea lion body? We haven’t talked much about it, and you’ve had time now, but…it must be difficult.”

“It is,” Dylan admitted. “But I love you, and the sacrifice was worth it. I don’t mind giving up the ocean for you.” Dylan smiled, leaning into her fiancé.

“I love *you*, and I don’t want you to be sad or disappointed,” Callan said, drawing close to her so his lips almost brushed hers.

“AHEM!” Maureen said from the quarterdeck.

“See what I mean? An irritant,” Dylan said when Callan sighed.

Callan laughed. “It’s the duty of older siblings. If you’ll excuse me, I must go be an irritant to my little sister. I don’t like the way she’s ogling your cousin. Take care,” Callan said, pressing a quick kiss to Dylan’s temple before Maureen could protest.

“You’ll be twenty paces away,” Dylan laughed.

“I know, but it’s you. Anything could happen,” Callan said with a smile—his real smile that was sly and a little sarcastic—before he walked away.

Dylan waited until he was gone before she folded herself over the side of the boat, grinning at the sight below her.

A kelpie, *her* kelpie with the light gray dapples, swam around the prow of the ship, looking cross but determined.

Maybe, a thought in the back of Dylan’s mind whispered. *Maybe I lost my sea lion body…but I imagine riding a* **kelpie** *in the ocean would be a good supplement.*

Dylan’s smile grew. “There’s only one way to find out.”

The End

Other books by K.M. Shea

Life Reader

Red Rope of Fate

Princess Ahira

Robyn Hood:
A Girl's Tale
Fight for Freedom

The Magical Beings' Rehabilitation Center:
My Life at the MBRC
Farewell to the MBRC?

King Arthur and Her Knights:
Enthroned
Enchanted
Embittered
Embark
Three pack (Enthroned, Enchanted, Embittered)

Timeless Fairy Tales
Beauty and the Beast
The Wild Swans
Cinderella
Rumpelstiltskin
The Little Selkie

Coming Soon

Enlighten: King Arthurs and her Knights Book 5: June 2015
Timeless Fairy Tales: Puss in Boots: Summer 2015

About the Author

K.M. Shea is a book lover, champion web surfer, and all around geek. She's been writing for over ten years and has worked as librarian and a newspaper reporter. K.M. lives in the quaint countryside with her pets: Perfect Dog and Fat Cat.

Follow K.M. Shea on Twitter: KM_Shea
Visit her blog: www.kmshea.com
Visit her Amazon Author Page: http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B005ANPMZU
Please visit the blog for information on upcoming books, free chapters, contests, scheduled freebies, and more!